

Voice of Women
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49% of marriages in the Palestinian territories are between relatives

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According to health statistics reported by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics for 2002, 49% of marriages in the Palestinian territories take place between relatives. The prevalence of this phenomenon is higher in Gaza (52.5%) than it is in the West Bank (46%). The survey's results for 2002 are not much different from those for 1995. Analysts argue that this phenomenon has negative implications on women and children's health.

Social aspect

The practice of marriage between relatives has existed for many generations. It remains prominent and socially popular as it is seen as a way to unite families. Marriage between relatives is believed to have economic and social benefits, including making the costs of the wedding itself less burdensome. For instance, the father of the bride is unlikely to demand a high dowry price from his nephew. On the other hand, it has been well documented that a wife in the traditional system is expected to carry responsibilities toward the extended family, and naturally a daughter-in-law who is already from the extended family would be most familiar with the traditions and with what is expected of her. This also means that family is likely to feel entitled to meddle in the affairs between the husband and the wife, which can impact the stability and independence of their relationship.

Studies in neighbouring Arab countries reveal that some marriages to relatives are forced on women; a male member of the family feeling he has the right to take any female relative he desires as his wife, showing little concern for her acceptance or opinion. Often the partners in these marriages lack compatibility in terms of age and level of education.

The health survey for 2000 which covered most of the Palestinian territory, revealed the relationship between intermarriage and early marriage; thus, intermarriage plays a role in the rise of fertility levels. The extended family, for instance, plays a big role in determining the number of children -- especially the number of males -- in the family. Statistics show that the average number of children in a family of related spouses is 4.5%, and the average number of children in a family where the spouses are not related is 3.9%.

Inter-marriages and genetic disorders

The result of the health survey for 2000 asserted that 28% of marriages in the Palestinian territory are between first cousins. This has a genitive impact on conception of children and labour during deliver. Many of the genetic diseases are chronic, such as Thalassemia, a hereditary blood disorder that causes anaemia, mental retardation and early death. Medical experts advise that couples undergo thorough medical check-ups before they commit to marriage in order to avoid hereditary diseases.

Women with special needs experience double oppression

Ibrahim Muhammad, Ramallah

If injustice and oppression are the greatest difficulties faced by people with special needs experience, the experience is multiplied if the person is a female: she is punished first for being a woman and second for being disabled.

The Palestinian General Union for the Disabled launched a national campaign in defence of the rights of the disabled. The campaign appealed to the courts to put an end to the discrimination and the injustice practiced against the disabled especially in their pursuit of employment both in the public and private sectors. People with disabilities constitute 3% of the Palestinian population -- about 120,000 -- of which 30% are females.

Women and disabilities

Ziad Amr, chairman of the Palestinian General Union for the Disabled, says that disabled women experience double the oppression of disabled men; firstly because they are women and secondly because they are disabled. The disabled woman, he explains, struggles against society's stereotypes of disabled people as inferior. He explains that this perception manifests itself in different forms of discrimination and coercion in most fields of employment and on all levels of political, social and economic life. The disabled woman struggles with a real form of oppression in the sense that on top of these challenges, she also suffers from a lack of educational opportunities. The prevalence of illiteracy among females is much higher than that among males. In spite of that, disabled women who have the privilege of pursuing their higher education have proven themselves capable of outstanding achievements and those who have had the chance to work professionally have also proven their commitment and excellence.

Isolation

Amr adds that families often isolate disabled girls from society because of their fear of the social stigmas associated with disabilities. It is a general belief that the entire family will be subjected to humiliation and may be ostracize because of the disability of a family member, particularly a female. Families claim that they are being protective of their disabled daughters as they fear they might be taken advantage of sexually. The family thus rationalizes its isolation of the disabled daughter within the house or even in cellars, or caves in inhuman conditions.

Amr told us about a girl who was nineteen years old in one of the villages on the outskirts of Ramallah. The girl, who is mentally retarded, was locked up in a cave for twelve years. The Union, in cooperation with rehabilitation centres, managed to get her out of the cave and provide a safe place for her. Amr added that they found her in an indescribable condition. Her body was very weak and because of the lack of nutrition, care, sanitation and movement for twelve years. She was almost naked because of her tattered and worn-out clothes.

Another story is of the kidnap and rape of a mentally retarded fourteen-year-old child. The child was kidnapped by a 55-year-old man, who took her to a house that he owned and raped her. Eventually the man was imprisoned, but he was released soon after during the invasion of Ramallah.

Society's ways of dealing with the issue

The public relations officer at the General Union of the disabled, Umayma Abu Shousheh, stated that societal trends and conceptions of women with disabilities are much more extreme than that of males with disabilities. As a matter of fact, the number of disabled males who marry and build families is much higher than that of females who rarely encounter such opportunities. It is also worth mentioning that if the disability was caused by a genetic disorder, the problem then doubles and becomes more complex for the rest of the family, especially for the other females in the family.

Abu Shousheh also affirmed that females bear the hardships of a disability in the family. If a married female becomes disabled it is most probable that her husband will re-marry. However, if a male in the family becomes disabled; the mother, sister, or wife then is expected to bear his responsibility. If the disabled male was struggling with a total or severe disability that prevented him from performing any duties, naturally he will get the family's full attention, whereas disabled females lose the chance to build a family and enjoy a stable social and economic life. Abu Shousheh added that it has become a necessity to equip women with the appropriate skills and tools in order to improve their care of the disabled children in the family. Mothers also should become more aware of their disabled children's rights and needs.

Abu Shousheh mentioned that most workers at rehabilitation centres are women. She described the services provided to the disabled as insufficient and as they don't cover all areas and all types and kinds of services. Additionally, most workers in both the private and the public sectors do not possess the required skills and experience. The issue also becomes more complicated because of the absence of social welfare and social care. Abu Shousheh said that 25 million dollars are spent annually on the rehabilitation sector, 12 million of which are given to 3 institutes while 13 million are spent on 140 institutes, this in turn is an indication of an unjust distribution of funds.