

## **Thirty Years of Empowering Kuwaiti Women through the Kuwait Union of Women Associations (AKUN): Reflections and a Report on the Regional Consultation on The Status of Women with Disabilities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**

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This reflective article offers an account of the Regional Consultation on The Status of Women with Disabilities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with the UN Special Rapporteur (SR), Dr. Heba Hagrass, on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, held December 3-4 in Kuwait. It begins with a brief overview of the process that led to the consultation; the research methodology rooted in feminist collaboration permitting the first author to join. Next is an overview of the organization that sponsored the consultation, the Kuwait Union of Women's Associations (AKUN) whose mission is to support and inspire Kuwaiti women and girls building their capacities and advocating for women's inclusion and equity across societal sectors, including those with disabilities. The article then presents some of the challenges faced by women with disabilities as explained by the women who participated in the consultation, rooting it in the literature. Recommendations submitted to the SR follow, staying true to their language as a reflection of the agency and authority derived from the lived experiences of participants, many of whom were women with disabilities.

**Keywords:** Kuwait; MENA; women and girls; disability advocacy; feminist disability studies

### **Introduction: Organizing a Consultation with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of People with Disabilities**

On August 31, 2024, Fox received an invitation from the Chairperson of the Kuwait Union of Women Associations (AKUN), her Excellency Sheikha Fadyah aad Al Abdullah Al Sabah, to attend and participate in the Regional Consultation of Persons with Disabilities in Kuwait on December 3-4, 2024. Planned to coincide with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the invitation and the consultation itself emerged from the publication of a special issue in the online open access Journal of International Women's Studies (JIWS), for which

Fox is founding executive editor. Titled *Toward Arab Women's Disability Studies: Encouraging an Inclusive Lens* (Volume 26, Issue 6), the special issue, informed by feminist disability studies, examines the status and conditions of women, children, and men with disabilities in the Arab World, recognizing that gender identities, statuses, and roles shape the lived experience of disability and should inform the nature of advocacy, policy initiatives and reforms. The special issue 'includes 22 countries extending from the Levant to the Arab Gulf Countries to North and East Africa' (Al Gharaibeh, Gibson and Olimat, 2024: 1). Co-author, and author of the second article in the special issue, Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi of Kuwait University and Vice President of AKUN had shared the issue with Sheikha Fadyah Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah when it was released. AKUN then collaborated with the Geneva Institute for Human Rights (GIHR) to invite Dr. Heba Hagrass, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Peoples with Disabilities (heretofore, SR) to organize the closed-door regional consultation. AKUN had previously hosted a closed-door regional consultative meeting in collaboration with the GIHR and the UN on violence against women and girls in the MENA region including the UN SR on Violence against Women and Girls, Reem Al Salem. Sheikha Fadyah Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah responded positively to Dr. Al-Mekaimi's suggestion to host the consultation because she believed that AKUN's actions in support of women and girls with disabilities should be expanded to deepen regional awareness, advocacy, and training workshops.

This article is organized into the following sections: 1) a description of the historical context for the emergence of AKUN, its mission, inclusive decision-making practices and engagement up to the consultation with women with disabilities. This overview addresses AKUN's work beyond disability studies to provide important context and identifying how AKUN will expand its advocacy for Kuwaiti women and girls with disabilities. One of the goals of AKUN is to assist in mainstreaming advocacy and support for women with disabilities, including consciousness raising and developing support structures in organizations that are not specifically disabilities organizations. We have included a broader discussion of AKUN beyond its work with women with disabilities in the hopes that their model may be useful for other organizations who seek to mainstream disability frameworks; 2) methodology: a discussion of the decolonial feminist approach that informs this reflective article as well as the ethical protocols of the research and writing; 3) an overview of the closed-door consultation outlining the challenges women with disabilities face as presented by the participants, linking their statements to the feminist disabilities studies (FDS) literature in particular; 4) a conclusion consisting of the recommendations coming out of the consultation rooted in the lived experiences of the women participants and members of their organizations. Lived experience, their articulation in testimonies and personal narratives are a fundamental tenet of feminist scholarship and activism. A number of the participants had various forms of disabilities including mobility, blindness and invisible disabilities—Non-Visible Disabilities (NVD)—from the trauma of war, sexual violence, displacement, and persistent discrimination. Centering their voices and experiences is central to FDS. They serve as powerful methods for decentering men's experiences as universal and recognizing women's lived experiences as authoritative.

We hope that dissemination of these recommendations as they were submitted to the SR can be valuable for those who wish to adapt them to different local, national, and regional contexts.

### **Decolonial Feminist Methodology: Foundations of the Collaboration and a Discussion about Process**

The reflective narrative framing of this article is informed by feminist ethnographic interventions into positivist research methodologies and those that make claims for the prioritization of objectivity that invisibilizes the researcher. Within the field of anthropology, there is a near century-old “herstory” of work stressing the value of surfacing researchers’ interests and/or positionalities as part of identifying the topics, goals, and processes of conducting fieldwork. Even before feminist ethnography was a concept, US-based anthropologists in the 1920s and ‘30s such as Margaret Mead (1928) and Zora Neale Hurston (1931) shaped the politics and praxis of knowledge production by grounding their research in topics emerging from women’s lived experiences such as sexuality, the gendered division of labor (referred to at the time as sex roles), race/class/gender intersections (prior to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s coining of the term “intersectionality”), motherhood, childrearing, and the like. Their work laid the foundation for subsequent generations of feminist ethnographers from the 1970s on to challenge assumptions of both objectivity and neutrality of research. As Kendir-Gök observes, ‘feminist ethnographers have developed a wide array of epistemological positions that interrogate the hierarchies embedded in traditional fieldwork practices’ (forthcoming, 2026: 1). Among those subscribed to here are Harding’s (1987) emphasis on reflexive accountability even within objective accounts, that highlight what Haraway (1988) referred to as situated knowledges: we all speak (and research and write) from a socio-cultural/politico-economic location that informs the questions we ask, our access to research opportunities, funding, and publishing. In the context of this article, we draw from this approach in a number of ways: 1) we offer a narrative about the creation of the closed door session with the SR so that readers can learn from the process of convening such an event; 2) we have highlighted the themes and recommendations of the women consultants as both women living with disabilities and founders and/or directors of organizations working closely with women with disabilities in their societies to improve their life conditions and transform the systemic inequalities and violences that limit their life opportunities. Wilde and Fish (2024) state that ‘disabled women are amongst the poorest of the poor worldwide’ and the pandemic and related austerity measures only deepened their poverty. Yet despite this urgency, they caution that there has been a prioritization of theoretical concerns by disability scholars that has led to the re-emergence of a personal tragedy model, the return of a parasitic model of disability research, and the relegation of disabled people to a fetishized academic gaze which effectively excludes or marginalizes current and future academics (Wilde and Fish, 2024).

Within anthropology, centering the lived experiences of women with disabilities in academic collaborations underscores their voices as authoritative, displacing the exclusive ethnographic authority of the authors. This approach seeks to ensure that knowledge construction, dissemination, and operationalization in policy initiatives are grounded in the lives of those most affected. The approach adopted here has been to collaborate with AKUN as a women-led social movement working to end discrimination and violence against women and girls across their various intersecting identity categories. This is ‘decolonial’ because it surfaces their visions and advocacy for women’s inclusion in political and economic institutions where they have been rendered absent historically through coloniality—either assumed to be confined to domestic spheres or actively confining and excluding. This approach supports the transformation of scholarship rooted in coloniality as a form of institutional change (Harrison, 1997; Lugones, 2010). Feminist decolonial researchers have encouraged innovative narrative strategies allowing multiple voices to emerge in ethnographic and other forms of scholarly writing, rectifying the processes by which women were written out of research—both women ethnographers conducting research and women with whom they worked (Moore, 1988). Collaboration in social movement activism creates shared agendas and identifies agreed upon divisions of labor. This article contributes to this ongoing effort by highlighting what we consider testimonies—they are a form of evidence, provided in this official capacity of a closed-door consultation that offer sober facts through personal narratives, of the particular situations of women with disabilities in the represented countries. As such they also indicate a form of advocacy for inclusive approaches to knowledge production, incorporating the voices of the subaltern (Spivak, 1988). We contend that this approach is anti-fetishization rejecting the reification and objectification that an overly academic focus on theory portends (as described above). By contrast, FDS, while theoretical is explicitly activist and collaborative, thereby diminishing the likelihood of fetishization of people with disabilities (PWD). Discussions of these processes of inclusion themselves within writing, as we are doing here, are also an important feminist intervention into scholarship, and a key feature of these decolonial partnerships that represent one pathway toward inclusion, activism, and advocacy.

### *Ethical protocols and interview process*

This section details the data collection tools, and the process for generating them including informal conversations and bonding with participants. In October 2024, a month prior to the consultation, Fox sought approval from AKUN leadership to conduct interviews. Once obtained, she submitted and received IRB approval from Bridgewater State University and began to work closely with the organizers, particularly Rasha Rashed of AKUN, to determine who would be involved and how the interviews would take place. Ms. Rashed identified potential interviewees and asked Fox to provide a list of questions in advance which she would share with them. After reviewing the questions with AKUN leadership, she conveyed recommendations for revisions (see interview questions, Appendix 1). We use non-anonymized names at participants’ request; when names are absent or anonymized, we are also

following participants' directions.

Although Fox planned to hold formal interviews after the consultation, once she arrived, she was encouraged to hold informal interviews during the consultation and to follow up afterwards. After the consultation it became difficult to organize formal meeting times. Thus, interviews took place in the following way: 1) informally, during refreshment breaks held at intervals during the consultation where Fox took notes; 2) respondents completed the interviews guide Fox shared with Rashed earlier and via email during the consultation, either returning typed hard copy responses in person or later by email; 3) on WhatsApp chats—both on voice and text messaging as follow-up questions during the consultation and through mid-July 2025.

Although Fox had prepared a consent form for in-person signatures, consent was obtained via email and WhatsApp permissions, after explaining how the interviews would be used when emailed to potential respondents. AKUN also created a WhatsApp chat, where, after the consultation, Fox shared the intention to write an article and requested that participants share their presentations. The testimonies later in this article come from AI translations of Arabic presentations into English checked by co-author Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi; from English WhatsApp chats, and email exchanges.

During lunch on the first day of the consultation, Fox sat with SR Dr. Hagrass, who enthusiastically shared that she had earned her MA degree in Anthropology. Fox and Hagrass enjoyed some conversations about their shared discipline before Fox explained her desire to write about AKUN and the consultation, asking for her permission to interview her. Both she and Sheikha Fadyha Al-Sabah had informed all participants that once the recommendations emerging from the consultation had been finalized, details about the consultation could be shared. During the event we weren't allowed to post photographs or disseminate detailed information about the consultation. In interpersonal conversations during the consultation breaks with the SR and Sheikha Fadyha, they informed Fox that they welcomed an article as an opportunity to open further discussion about women and girls with disabilities in the MENA region and to build broader awareness of AKUN. Further bonding took place in the days following the consultation when Fox was exposed to the generous hospitality of AKUN's leadership, creating the space to develop some interpersonal connections helpful for the type of feminist collaborations we have outlined above.

### **Introducing the Kuwait Union of Women's Associations (AKUN): Historical Context, Strategic Objectives**

This section explores how AKUN is situated within Kuwait's history, shaping the country's support for women's rights in legislation and public opinion, and expanding to regional

influence. We begin by providing an overview of AKUN's founding mandate, central objectives, and select activities. The ideas presented here are an edited version of the responses to the interview questions from AKUN Chairwoman Sheikha Fadyha Al-Sabah, Vice President of AKUN and co-author Dr Haila Al Mekaimi, and UN Committee Member, Kuwait Rights for Persons with Disabilities, Ms. Rehab Brosli. As noted above, this discussion is also informed by the interpersonal conversations held in Kuwait after the consultation especially with Dr. Haila over many days and with Sheikha Fadyah Al-Sabah and Sheikha Nabila Salman Al-Hamoud Al-Sabah over a delicious lunch.

It is not coincidence that the consultation was held in Kuwait and hosted by AKUN: Kuwait's distinction as one of the MENA's most progressive societies for women stems from a unique interplay of historical, cultural, economic, and religious factors. One of these factors is trade-based cosmopolitanism, which emerged through Kuwait's geopolitical positioning as a historic trading hub with diverse migrant communities. Through trade and exposure to global cultures, Kuwaiti society absorbed innovative ideas about gender roles fostering openness to redefining women's societal contributions. Moreover, prior to the discovery and development of the oil industry, men's prolonged absences (due to pearl diving and trade) necessitated women's leadership in managing households, finances, and community affairs. This normalized women's autonomy and decision-making, building a foundation for social transformation. In the current period of oil wealth and modernization, women have retained significant independence. The cultural legacy of self-reliance, rooted in men's historical absences, endured, easing acceptance of women's entry into education, professions, and public life. Another pivotal factor includes Kuwait's interpretation of Islam through Islamic legal frameworks drawing on Islamic principles enshrining women's rights to retain their names after marriage, inherit property, and achieve financial independence. These rights predate many Western systems and remain largely unknown in the West, standing in contrast to dominant Islamophobic and White Western savior narratives that misconstrue women's lives across many Middle Eastern societies. These religiously codified protections provided a cultural and legal basis for women's autonomy, and in contemporary times seek to harmonize tradition with progress via Islamic feminist interventions. As Kynsilehto writes:

The Qu'ran contains principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice, thus laying grounds for challenging patriarchal traditions... 'Islamic feminism' explicitly focuses on the process of unmasking these principles from the confines of patriarchal traditions; as an *extension* of the faith position instead of a *rejection* of this position (2008:10).

This Qu'ranic context created a foundation for the emergence of advocacy and reform by grassroots women's movements to expand women's political participation, leading to gradual legal reforms such as suffrage in 2005. Kuwait's blend of Islamic values and modern governance allowed reforms to align with cultural identity. This synergy of necessity, cultural



adaptability, and Islamic legal empowerment positioned Kuwait as a regional model for women's rights (interview responses: Sheikha Fadyha Al-Sabah, Dr Haila Al Mekaimi).

Within this context, AKUN emerged from a blend of visionary leadership and regional solidarity. Sheikha Latifa Al-Fahad Al-Salem Al-Sabah's Vision recognized the importance of uniting fragmented efforts among Kuwaiti women's groups and sought to unify these voices. Her goal was to create a collaborative platform addressing shared goals such as political participation, economic inclusion, and social equity. Importantly, the global women's movement helped to catalyze the formation of AKUN: the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing included a contingent of Kuwaiti women's unions which emphasized solidarity among women along the lines of the Beijing Platform for Action that similarly highlighted the need for coordinated advocacy and cross-border cooperation. Thus, a central strategic objective of AKUN was to create a bridge for Kuwaiti women's organizations to amplify their collective demands for legal reforms and gender-sensitive policies. Other objectives include global representation to elevate Kuwaiti women's voices in international forums such as the UN to ensure their inclusion in global gender equality agendas; and empowerment initiatives that provide training, mentorship, and resources to bolster women's leadership in politics, business, and civil society.

To date, AKUN has been involved in several actions related to the intersection between disability and gender discrimination. These include 1) awareness campaigns through workshops and conferences to educate policymakers and the public on this intersectional challenge. An example is a series of workshops training participants on the international mechanisms to protect women's rights; 2) developing advocacy frameworks through policy recommendations to Kuwaiti and regional governments, urging disability-inclusive education, healthcare, and employment opportunities; 3) building regional solidarity through coalitions with disability-focused NGOs to share best practices and lobbying for regional treaties protecting women with disabilities; 4) increasing visibility by elevating the rights of women with disabilities in national and regional agendas, challenging ongoing societal stigmas; and 5) influencing policy by pushing for Kuwait's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its gender-sensitive implementation. The consultation represented an expansion of these activities to a supra-regional collaboration among academia, the UN, the GIHR, as well as a host of MENA-based civil society organizations working to support new gender-sensitive policy initiatives throughout the region and to offer the global disability community an appreciation for existing regional achievements that support women and girls broadly in realizing their human rights.

The closed door consultation was therefore significant because of its commitment to expanding AKUN's advocacy for women with disabilities under the framework of its visionary leadership and mandate, namely: 'The empowerment and support of Kuwaiti women and the creation of more inspirational women in the process of sustainable development by all possible means, in

all local, regional and international spheres, through a series of programmes, projects and initiatives supervised and embraced by the Federation, together with the great partnerships and high competencies with which it is distinguished' (<https://akun.org.kw/en/about.html>).

AKUN is therefore an organization of great interest to the global human rights movement offering a model for other umbrella organizations in particular seeking to advance equality and opportunities for women and girls and beyond. The session itself represents an achievement of the international human rights apparatus which includes engagement with civil society organizations and government agencies to realize international human rights. Closed-door consultations are an important feature of the work of SRs. They disseminate information about the work of the High Commission on Human Rights and the role of SRs; they enrich the expertise of SRs themselves as advocates for specific issues through the detailed and sensitive testimonies of human rights abuses within their domain. Advocacy for human rights occurs partly through address of testimonies that tell of lived experiences of human rights abuses. While crucial next steps—the implementation of the recommendations, monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement—are beyond the scope of this article, the consultation stage illuminates one of the strategies within the UN system for addressing the significant challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities, the largest demographic of disabled persons worldwide (Chan and Hutchings, 2023).

AKUN's model demonstrates how structured collaboration, adaptive governance, and inclusive problem-solving can address systemic challenges in advancing the rights and opportunities of women with disabilities. Through this regional consultation, AKUN has expanded its global advocacy and regional institutional partnerships. Within Kuwait, the country's broader societal focus on sustainable development often overlooks the critical need to integrate women fully into leadership roles in high level decision-making positions. Despite women's participation in education and the workforce, and although they gained the right to vote and run for office in 2005, their representation in parliament remains limited, with only 18% of posts held by women. Moreover, there is no information publicly available as to whether any of these are women with disabilities. However, Kuwait's Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) mandated to promote the rights of women and girls with disabilities in legislation and policies, monitoring and reporting, includes membership of persons with disabilities and parents who have children with disabilities (Al Mekaimi, 2024). The consultation with the SR offers an opportunity for AKUN to partner with the CRPD to increase the leadership roles of women with disabilities in parliamentary representation.

### **The Closed-Door Consultation: Global Representation, Empowerment, and Inclusivity**

In this section we demonstrate how the objectives of the consultation reflect the tenets of FDS which intersect with the decolonial feminist anthropological approach we have outlined above. Both are forms of scholar-activism, reflecting the two arms of feminism. Both center intersectional lived experiences as a driving force for inclusive practices across societal



institutions. In scholarship, inclusivity can be implemented through the collaborative praxis we have outlined above transforming ‘writing about’—that increases the risk of fetishizing and reification—to ‘writing with’ regarding scholarship as a form of social movement activism in consciousness raising, insisting that the personal is political (Chouinard, 2023). In merging feminist discourse with Disability Studies (DS), FDS outlines a pathway to intersectionality by critiquing the historical marginalization of disabled women, girls and non-binary genders from feminist research, offering instead robust analyses of how gender and disability intersect as systems of ableist oppression and identity (Simplican, 2017). FDS rejects single axis analysis that isolates disability from other identity categories such as gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, class, caste, etc. Like decolonial feminist anthropology, FDS rejects victim narratives, shifting focus to experiences of and management of pain, approaches to care—receiving and giving—and the phenomenology of bodily difference. Centering women’s voices and experiences, FDS also challenges dominant cultural narratives portraying disabled women as passive victims or objects of pity. Agency, resistance to their exclusion and representation, documenting their achievement, are features of FDS—what Simplican (ibid) calls ‘life-writing’ about experiences of disability and care/caregiving—which in decolonial feminist anthropology is a form of autoethnography.

In the spirit of embracing life-writing praxis, Rula Helo a Lebanese journalist, poet, and disability advocate who wishes her name to be used in quoting her, shared a poem with us (7/18/25) to include here:

*The Calmness of her Feet*

I love a woman who cannot move her legs,  
Yet moved me with everything she holds inside.  
I love her so deeply—she made me dance  
In the palms of her hands...

I became a version of myself,  
Anxious—burning on the embers of her cheeks.

I love a woman whose wheelchair  
Set me in motion,  
Lifted me, scattered me,  
So I could breathe from her lungs.

Dangerous, my woman—  
Mad, my beloved...

Drove me to madness

Until I thought I was home,  
Sheltered beneath the whiteness of your shoulders.

...

The stillness in your feet

هدوء قدميها

أعشق امرأة لا تحرك ساقها  
أعشق امرأة حركتني بكل ما لديها  
أحبها بعمق - جعلتني أرقص في راحة يديها  
وأصبحت أنا أشبه نفسي  
قلقا من جمر خديها  
أعشق امرأة كرسيتها المدولب  
حركني طيرني شردني لا تنفس رثيها  
خطيرة يا امرأتي  
مجنونة يا أنثاي  
جننتني حيث ظننت أنني هنا  
...أستظل ببياض كتفيها  
وبقيت أرسم شيئا من الصلاة  
علني أحرك هدوء قدميها

The poem reflects the phenomenology of bodily difference, serving as a form of ardent advocacy to rectify the marginalization and invisibilization of people with disabilities from discourses of love, romance, and marriage—and from activist spaces ‘...including the spaces where the topics of conversation include them and impact them’ (Akande and Manser, 2024). The consultation was itself a rejection of this discriminatory pattern by intentionally including women with disabilities, as well as women who have spearhead disability rights organizations across the MENA region.

The session opened with a welcome from Her Excellency Sheikha Fadyah Saad Al Abdullah Al Sabah and brief introductions by participants, building rapport and a general positive feeling of inclusion. The opening section also presented the role of the SR in relation to the CRPD to raise awareness on the importance of working with SRs as a means of addressing various human rights issues in their country and explicating the process of submitting human rights violations to the High Commission on Human Rights (HCHR). Here, AKUN demonstrated its commitment to empowerment through knowledge and skills-building, explaining how their testimonies can become part of human rights discourse and subsequent interventions at regional and international levels. Women shared their testimonies learning how they would become part of public awareness of human rights abuses. Here, we also distinguish them as feminist narrative strategies that in themselves empower by lending legitimacy, voice and validation to

those experiences. Their power is also in linking subjectivity to wider systemic inequalities and forms of structural violence that lead to recommendations and policy initiatives along with other strategies for liberatory transformation through documented realities. Other objectives of the consultation were to:

- Identify and analyze legal, social, and institutional barriers that prevent the full inclusion of PWD in the region
- Share best practices and success stories with the goal of collaborating on solutions for advancing disability rights in the MENA context that propose region-specific recommendations and an action plan
- Enhance regional cooperation among governments, civil society, disability rights
- Encourage non-governmental organizations and human rights defenders to urge Governments in the region to extend an open invitation to their country's special procedures
- Identify ways for women and disability-oriented organizations to cooperate with local authorities and actors, regional and United Nations human rights mechanisms.

AKUN's adoption of a pragmatic, inclusive feminist philosophy prioritizing unity over adherence to specific branches like Islamic or liberal feminism encourages a holistic advocacy for economic inclusion and political representation without ideological constraints, ensuring relevance to Kuwait's population of diverse women including women with disabilities. Encouraging the framework of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) leverages Kuwait's ratification of that human rights instrument to align local efforts with global gender equality standards. AKUN also encourages strengthening of civil society to promote the rule of law, citizenship rights, and equitable opportunities for all, framing women's empowerment as integral to national progress. Tackling the struggles that women with disabilities face, potentially improves conditions for all women by dismantling systems of oppression within which women with disabilities are the most vulnerable through ideologies, stigmas, and structural inequalities. Misconceptions about women with disabilities overlap with misconceptions about all women such as views about their functional capacity—intellectual, emotional, and physical. Prejudices against women around absenteeism (due to pregnancy or monthly hormonal cycles) are exacerbated with specific prejudices toward women with disabilities. This overview of AKUN, positioned within its historical context, achievements and challenges brings us to the UN consultation with Dr. Heba Hagrass, where the voices of women with disabilities were centered in the presentations emerging both from their lived experience and the research conducted by their organizations. The result was a robust clustering of regional recommendations.

### **The Testimonies: Lived Experiences of Women with Disabilities**

As outlined in the methodology, the narratives below come from 1) testimonies delivered at

the consultation, 2) follow-up interviews on WhatsApp and email, 3) and excerpts from the JIWS' special issue articles in "Toward Arab Women's Disability Studies" introduced previously. We focus on examples from Lebanon, Palestine, Kuwait, the UAE, and Oman, beginning with a critical observation about inclusiveness and belonging that SR Hagrass shared with Fox in a post-consultation WhatsApp chat reflection. The SR stressed the importance of mainstreaming disability inclusion *beyond organizations that have been designed exclusively for that purpose*:

The importance of this meeting is that there are all these NGOs and organizations of civil society that are working with women—different types and categories of women—*but they are not dealing with women with disabilities*. So what was very important with this meeting is that now Sheikha Fadyha realizes that the category of "women with disabilities" is an integral part of the category "women" and is part of the work of women's rights. What I am suggesting is how to sensitize *all of these organizations* to be more inclusive and not to invent or make special new NGOs for women with disability but to make these NGOs *already available* more sensitive to issues of women and girls with disabilities and to include in their services how to cater to this category of women, not leaving that for special NGOs but to be able and more aware that women with disabilities are like all other women. They can easily cater to their needs and be a more inclusive setting (WhatsApp voice note, 2/6/25. Italics and quotations connote verbal emphasis added by Fox).

This message points to a pathway for mainstreaming women with disabilities, challenging an approach that silos them into discrete organizations that have the potential to further marginalize. While Hagrass is not suggesting that organizations already established to address the needs of women and girls with disabilities be dissolved, she is stressing the way forward: *all organizations* that work on women's issues should be organizations that women with disabilities can participate in. The message resonates with recent scholarship on what Wilde and Fish (2024) refer to as a growing 'absent presence' of Disability Studies (DS) a paradox of exclusion—paradoxical because of the ways in which:

...disabled women can be seen to have played a crucial role in orientating us towards new directions for theory, often critiquing the 'rather insular' character of DS. [They bring attention to] the ways in which disabled women are marginalised within academia. Indeed, we are concerned that disabled women are becoming overlooked within C/DS [Critical Disability Studies], being something of an 'absent presence' (Wild and Fish, 2024)

This absent presence which they underscore—especially evident in academia—has implications for policy and its implementation. Here, then, following the tenets of FDS and decolonial feminist ethnography, we center the challenges, hopes, and recommendations of

women with disabilities with select examples. We open with the testimony provided by Rula Helo, whose poem we cited above. She began her presentation by asking: “where is the disabled woman in our Lebanese society?” She starts with adolescent girls followed by insights into the obstacles that girls and women face in Lebanon:

Because she is an inseparable part of society, and because she stems from her human essence, the woman remains a female who needs support from her surrounding environment. And how much more so if she has a disability! We must speak to them with full awareness and absolute honesty to reclaim what women with disabilities are missing in their communities.

The adolescent girl with a disability in Lebanese society goes through very delicate stages. She still lacks the psychological support that would allow her to live like other girls her age. At this stage, she begins to form her personality and self-confidence, especially in dealing with her body and the biological changes she experiences. If she does not receive care and support from her family and surrounding environment, this will reflect negatively on her and her interactions with friends of both genders. In Lebanon, we urgently need to provide all forms of medical and psychological support to adolescent girls so they can face life with confidence—whether at school, with peers, with family, or in their broader environment—so that nothing harmful, such as harassment or discrimination, stands in their way.

One of the main obstacles for Lebanese women is the ability to obtain a job that ensures a decent living. This is considered a form of indirect economic violence that prevents her from living with financial independence. Employers often do not comply with the law requiring the employment of people with disabilities, and they are hesitant to hire a woman with a disability. They tend to discriminate between women with and without disabilities, possibly due to a lack of belief in her presence, academic qualifications, or ability to perform her job properly. This issue affects women with disabilities psychologically, especially those who have obtained university or other degrees that qualify them to work just like any other woman.

Women with disabilities in Lebanese society strive to assert their presence, especially married women, who are few in number. This is, of course, due to their disability and the lack of acceptance from men—often stemming from fear of their families and communities not accepting a wife with a disability. There is a belief that a disabled wife cannot fulfill her marital duties properly, and some fear the issue of infertility. Society often fails to recognize her physical capabilities and considers her incapable in many cases. However, there are successful experiences that have proven otherwise.

The femininity of disabled women is a large and essential area that our societies

unfortunately ignore. In Lebanon, the discussion around it is still shy and receives little attention or importance. A woman with a disability has the right to live like any other woman in terms of caring for her appearance, grooming, and presenting herself appropriately in society. This boosts her self-confidence and gives her a strong start among her family, relatives, and peers. We find that women with disabilities in Lebanon work hard to prove this to their environment, saying: “I am here, and I am beautiful like any other woman—do not discriminate against me.”

Women with disabilities also face a major issue in disability institutions, as they encounter clear and direct discrimination. Most of those in charge of disability institutions are men with disabilities, who often doubt women's capabilities or do not give them the opportunity to lead in this field.

Concurring with Rula's observations about femininity were especially poignant descriptions by participants of loneliness because of family shame and assumptions about their lack of interest and capacity for intimate relationships and marriage. In a region where marriage remains a significant marker of social status for women, singleness and disability combine as a specific type of intersectional oppression for women in the region. One participant stated, illustrating intersectional discrimination:

There is the assumption that mothers should know everything about their children and women are blamed for the problems of their children. Parents hesitate to take their daughters with disabilities to the doctor because they're afraid that will create a stigma and will reduce their opportunities to marry.

Rula continued to speak passionately throughout the consultation, in addition to the above testimony, about how difficult it is in Lebanon for women with physical disabilities to marry, because daughters are kept outside of social circles that could lead to engagements. Shame and embarrassment as well as fear for their daughters' being recipients of stigma drives this sheltering, contributing to young women's experience of self-loathing as well. Her testimonies are especially significant because Lebanon is the only MENA states that has not acceded to the CRPD. While ratifying a convention is only a first step, it's a critical one, especially when met with funding for legal operationalization and consciousness-raising education. A study from the JIWS' special issue—a first of its kind from the UAE—sought to document and analyze university students' attitudes toward marrying PWD. Results showed surprising, positive views that demonstrate the importance of legal frameworks coupled with educational awareness. The study demonstrated that:

...educational curricula and various activities aimed at integrating people with disabilities into society...have positively influenced students' attitudes towards their marriage. Additionally, the substantial presence of students with disabilities throughout



the academic journey, supportive academic programs like special education offered to undergraduate students in the UAE universities and inclusive courses for integrating disabled students, contribute significantly to fostering positive attitudes towards people with disabilities as well as acceptance, respect, and acknowledgment of their right to marriage in society (Kamel Ellala et al., 2024: 15).

The study also showed no statistically significant differences:

...in university students' attitudes towards the marriage of people with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates attributed to gender, which means that the attitudes towards the marriage of people with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates of the men and women at the university towards the marriage of people with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates were of the same opinion. Both encourage the marriage of people with disabilities in the UAE. The investigators attributed this to the fact that programs, curricula, and activities are offered to all men and women in university the same level of experience and expertise, without bias or discrimination based on gender. Moreover, the educational and awareness programs provided by educational and informational institutions in the country are directed towards both men and women (ibid.).

Kuwait, like the UAE has made significant legal developments (ibid.). As co-author Al-Mekaimi observes, the primary obstacles facing women in Kuwait revolve around sustainable societal progress and advancing awareness of women's rights, especially in politics. However, these challenges differ significantly across social, economic, and cultural contexts when examining diverse groups of women. For instance, while gender equality and representation remain universal hurdles, certain groups confront compounded challenges. Women with disabilities grapple with distinct barriers such as inadequate accessibility, exclusion from public spaces, and insufficient recognition of their rights. As one participant in Al-Mekaimi's study asserted, 'Kuwait has made efforts to improve the rights of persons with disabilities through legislation, but these laws are ineffectively implemented by governmental and private institutions' (2024:10). Moreover, the results of her research indicate:

...most people agreed that implementation was ineffective, and that there was a lot of variance by gender...impl[ying] that women experience difficulties not only with getting accommodations or the rights promised by legislation, but also those specific to a wider general bill of rights. Since these results follow a pattern, that women are more dissatisfied with legislative enforcement and institutional support than men, these results highlight the consistency in a pattern. This is a disparity that suggests that although laws exist to protect people with disabilities' rights...the practical implementation of these laws in government and private sectors in particular is an enormous problem, particularly for women (ibid: 10).

Still, it is important to identify the legal achievements. They include notably, the 2010 Law No. 8 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which marked a turning point in Kuwait's legislative approach. This law guarantees persons with disabilities the right to education, employment, housing, healthcare, and accessibility. It also introduced a framework for disability-related benefits and services, such as financial allowances, early retirement, and the right to inclusive education and job placement. These provisions were a significant step forward in aligning Kuwait's legislation with international standards, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), to which Kuwait is a signatory.

One of the law's most transformative aspects was the formal recognition of the intersectionality of gender and disability, especially in employment and family policy. For example, the law provides protections against workplace discrimination and obliges both public and private sectors to allocate a percentage of jobs to people with disabilities. In theory, this has created opportunities for women with disabilities to enter or remain in the labor force under more equitable conditions. In addition, Kuwait's Public Authority for Disabled Affairs (PADA) has institutionalized mechanisms for disability certification and access to support services, which can be particularly vital for women who are often primary caregivers or face compounded marginalization.

These legislative reforms are significant because they signal a shift in state discourse—from charity and welfare to rights and inclusion. Legal recognition offers a platform for advocacy and accountability, and it empowers civil society groups, including women-led disability organizations, to push for more rigorous enforcement. While implementation remains inconsistent and gender disparities persist, especially in terms of accessibility, awareness, and enforcement, these legal achievements lay the groundwork for systemic change. They also provide a language and structure through which women with disabilities can claim their rights and challenge institutional neglect. In this sense, legal change has not only improved lives materially but also legitimized the presence and voices of women with disabilities in the public and policy spheres.

In addition to societal stigma, infrastructural limitations hinder their participation in civic life and decision-making. Moreover, the challenges that women and girls with disabilities face are not homogenous. At family and community levels, they face challenges of living independently and the need for emotional support due to persistent stigma. At professional and governmental levels, they face difficulty in assuming leadership positions due to lack of enabling digital access and creating enabling physical environments. These necessitate targeted policies to ensure equitable inclusion.

The testimony provided by the two women representatives from the Stars of Hope organization in Palestine speak to the particular trauma of girls and women with disabilities in the current crisis. Their testimony included statistics of suffering through a study conducted by Stars of

Hope:

The impact of this war is compounded for women, especially women with disabilities. The lack of hygiene supplies and reproductive health services, overcrowding, loss of family breadwinners, and the need to live in tents that do not meet basic safety or accessibility standards all contribute to their suffering. Iyad Al-Karnaz, Director of the Stars of Hope office in Gaza, stated in an interview:

‘Sometimes tents are not available, forcing women to stay in public spaces. When tents are available, they are overcrowded, with 15 to 30 people in one tent. These tents are usually on sandy surfaces, which are not suitable for persons with disabilities. Assistive devices, if available, become useless in such environments. There is a severe shortage of water, and the toilets are inaccessible and far from the tents, which increases the suffering of persons with disabilities during the war.’

The occupation also targets essential sectors and service institutions. Since the war began, many institutions serving persons with disabilities have been partially or completely destroyed. These institutions provide rehabilitation and assistive devices and maintain databases on persons with disabilities and their locations. With these institutions out of service, approximately 118,000 persons with disabilities have lost access to services entirely, and 38,000 have lost partial access. The closure of these institutions, which many rely on, exacerbates their suffering and reduces their chances of survival.

The lack of inclusive infrastructure, hygiene supplies, and health necessities disproportionately affects women with disabilities. Overcrowding and inaccessible toilets force them to wait in long lines. One woman said: ‘Using the toilet is my biggest problem. I don’t have a wheelchair or walker. I crawl to the toilet.’

In another testimony, participant, Ms. Amal Al-Sayer of the Kuwait Association for Learning Differences (KALD) spoke about women and the challenges of hidden disabilities. She shared the following written response to an interview question about how gender is implicated in learning differences:

Men and boys are diagnosed with ADHD far more commonly than girls because of lingering stereotypes, referral bias, gender role expectations, comorbidities and hormonal fluctuations, which complicate the ADHD presentation in girls and women, who are routinely dismissed, misdiagnosed and treated inadequately.

Ms. Al-Sayer also shared what led her to create KALD:

In 1999, my three-year-old child was diagnosed with ADHD. As a member of the PTA of my child's school, I witnessed the suffering of mothers who didn't know anything about ADHD. I decided then to establish an organization that would spread awareness of this disorder and provide the necessary services to students with ADHD, their families, and schools...In 2007, the workforce of the organization comprised five women, including 11 women volunteers on the Board of Trustees, employees, and part-time service providers. Women still dominate the scene. We seek to build awareness through campaigns on a national level, media, publications and parents' forums; provide support for students, and training for teachers through workshops and international conferences.

KALD is an example of an organization that empowers women, children and families, yet still acknowledges the work to be done around stigma and its gendered nature. It is also interesting to note that women's employment outnumbers that of men at KALD, likely because the work is regarded as a form of care-work, the traditional domain of women. As with KALD, however, women participants launched, lead, and play active roles in the organizations they have created to support women and girls, and therefore, their own participation in leadership and decision-making are high. Their organizations aim to expand other women's opportunities for decision-making in public and private sectors through empowerment and awareness of their rights.

Another set of insights into gendered experiences of education is discussed in the article 'Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women Students with Mobility Disabilities Accessing Higher Education in Oman' (Al-Marzouqi et al., 2004: 10-12), part of the JIWS' special issue. The article shared various testimonies including a woman university student who shared:

We can get access and services but there are a lot of barriers affecting my access to learning. There are no facilities for us within the campus of the university...for example, my classrooms are crowded and sometimes I cannot find a space for me as I am sitting in my wheelchair. Often, I arrived late to do exams because I felt tired moving under the sun in my wheelchair... there are no support services for disabled students. We have general support services for all students. And, it is crowded with male students, and I feel shy. (Student 10)

I have few close friends; students look at me differently...not like normal students. They treat me differently; I feel I am not a woman like them because I cannot do what they do. Several times I arrived late for the exams because I walked with the help of a crutch and wore an Abaya. This was too much as my Abaya became dirty because of the roads, and I could not elevate my Abaya because I walked using a crutch. The road was not well- constructed and many times I nearly fell. We could get access but with many struggles... this is an issue not only for me as a mobility disabled but also for normal female students. (Student 8)

I have had bad experiences doing other activities not related to studying...I cannot do work within the college due to my disability...also I cannot participate in community services such as beach cleaning and clubs because my family refuses to allow me. According to my family, this is not women's work, and as a woman, I cannot clean at the beach or participate in clubs with men...Also, the college does not have a sports competition for disabled people because we are few. (Student 11)

The experiences of these women students are tied both to issues of physical accessibility of their universities and cultural factors such as navigating a campus with an Abaya or being prevented from a beach clean-up, likely because of her family's religious views about the proper role of a daughter combined with overprotection due to her disability.

The experiences of these women students are shaped not only by the physical (in)accessibility of university campuses—such as the absence of ramps, elevators, or adapted transportation—but also by cultural and familial factors. For instance, some women navigate public spaces wearing the *abaya*, which may pose challenges in mobility or signal expectations of modesty that restrict their participation in extracurricular or public activities. One student, for example, was prevented from participating in a beach clean-up event—likely due to a combination of religiously informed gender norms and parental overprotection stemming from her disability. These layers of constraint highlight how disability and gender intersect within specific sociocultural contexts, limiting both autonomy and public engagement.

It is equally important to underscore the heightened vulnerability of women and girls with disabilities to gender-based violence (GBV) and other forms of abuse. This includes risks related to menstrual dignity—such as inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products, privacy, or proper facilities in schools and institutions—as well as sexual and reproductive health, including stigmatization during pregnancy and a lack of access to tailored healthcare<sup>1</sup>. Women with disabilities face elevated risks of intimate partner violence (IPV), family and domestic abuse, and even femicide, particularly in contexts where honor and shame are closely tied to women's behavior and bodies. In Kuwait, for example, so-called 'honor crimes' have historically been a mechanism of gender control, though recent legal reforms—supported by persistent advocacy from women's rights organizations in collaboration with UN agencies—have criminalized such acts. Since 2015, women in Kuwait have actively sought to abolish Article 153 of the Penal Code, which women's rights organizations have decried for its lenient sentences for honor killings. On March 18, their activism, combined with UN pressure led to a degree to abolish Article 153, which treats such killings as murder; its abolition also legally ends child marriage (Ossman, 2025). These legal developments are a critical step, yet they must be coupled with cultural transformation and effective enforcement to ensure real safety and dignity for women and girls with disabilities (Al Qahtani, 2022; Chelser, 2010).

This testimony-driven overview highlights the urgent need for intersectional approaches that

address the multifaceted barriers faced by women with disabilities, emphasizing the vital role of inclusive advocacy, legal reform, and education in transforming societal attitudes to enable full participation of women with disabilities in all spheres of life.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

On the last day, we were encouraged to submit our recommendations to Ms. Rasha Rashed who then shared them with Sheikha Fadyah and the SR. Once the SR received the final list, it was shared back with participants. We disseminate it here, with permission. While the recommendations are indeed prescriptive, we have chosen to present them (translated from the Arabic to English) precisely as they were framed by participants for the SR; these are their ideas reflecting a praxis that centers women's voices and agency. The purpose of offering these recommendations is to view them as an artifact of the consultation.

Moreover, feminist disability studies call for the inclusion of the perspectives and insights of women (and non-binary genders) living with disabilities to inform policy (Ferri and Gregg 1998). Their voices should be considered authoritative. In her testimony, Rula Helo whom we introduced earlier asserted:

...it is the role of individuals with disabilities, institutions, relevant ministries, unions, and others to stand up to the challenges that women with disabilities face. We must work together to support them, continue the journey, and break down the barriers that stand in their way.

### *Firstly: Regarding the Role of the SR*

1. Urge all organizations concerned with the rights of women with disabilities to respond to the Rapporteur's call to build strong connections with her office to benefit from international, regional, and national expertise and support.
2. Encourage regional and national organizations to clearly incorporate the needs of women with disabilities into their activities and services, recognizing their unique challenges and ensuring their rights as women.

### *Secondly: Regarding Challenges Faced During Armed Conflicts*

1. Call for an immediate cessation of military operations due to their disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities, and urge the implementation of international agreements, including Article 11 of the CRPD and UN Security Council Resolution 2475, ensuring protection for displaced persons and civilians, especially women with disabilities.
2. Integrate women with disabilities into emergency planning processes to meet their specific needs and train staff on how to assist them effectively.



3. Advocate for legal protections and ensure safe reporting channels for women with disabilities experiencing violations during conflicts.
4. Include women with disabilities in relief programs and collaborate with Palestinian organizations in addressing their priorities.
5. Highlight local, regional, and global responsibility for holding Israel accountable for rights violations against women with disabilities in Palestine.

*Thirdly: Regarding Sexual and Reproductive Health for Women with Disabilities.*

As Kamel Ellala et al. conclude regarding their study among Omani university students in a sentiment shared by Rula earlier:

...the intersection of gender and disability can create profound disadvantages, particularly for women. Therefore, legal frameworks with an explicit consideration of the nexus between women's and disability rights are needed in matters relating to marriage. These frameworks should address discrimination, harmful stereotypes, lack of support services, and promote greater inclusion to ensure equal participation for disabled women in their personal and family lives (2024:16)

1. Participants urge national and regional entities focusing on women's issues, sexual and reproductive health, and disability rights to prioritize ensuring full access to proper sexual and reproductive health rights for women with disabilities. This aligns with this year's global theme for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.
2. All stakeholders must address the intersectionality of sexual and reproductive health rights with other rights. This focus is vital to empowering women with disabilities, fostering independence, and ensuring their rights to family life and leadership roles.
3. Awareness campaigns targeting healthcare providers should emphasize the equal physical and sexual capacities of women with and without disabilities. Disability does not imply a lack of reproductive or sexual capability.
4. Legislative frameworks must be enhanced to guarantee the rights of women with disabilities, ensuring genuine equality in education, employment, and healthcare, and enforcing these laws effectively.
5. Supportive educational environments should be created for women with disabilities, enabling them to build on their strengths through specialized teaching methods and integrated academic, psychological, and social programs.

6. Educational and awareness campaigns should aim to dismantle stigma and discrimination, educating society about the rights guaranteed to PWD. Media outlets should play a role in shifting stereotypes and promoting a positive, inclusive image.
7. Psychological and social support programs should assist women with disabilities in coping with challenges. Local support groups should be established to share experiences and provide mutual support, particularly on sexual and reproductive health issues.
8. Health programs and rehabilitation services must meet the specific needs of women with disabilities, including regular check-ups and treatment.
9. Mechanisms should be developed for data collection and monitoring related to the sexual and reproductive health rights of women with disabilities.
10. Programs should encourage women with disabilities to participate in decision-making processes at all levels.
11. Infrastructure must be improved to be more accessible for women with disabilities, including public transport and facilities. Assistive technologies should be provided to enhance access to essential information.
12. Political parties should be encouraged to nominate women with disabilities for leadership positions. Training programs should be offered to candidates on managing electoral campaigns and parliamentary work.
13. Comprehensive support for women with disabilities at all life stages, including as children, students, workers, wives, and mothers, is essential to prevent psychological and social challenges such as depression and divorce.
14. In line with Article 24, Clause 2 (e) of the ICRD, provides effective individualized support measures in environments that maximize academic and social development and align with the goal of full inclusion
15. Educational and training programs should be established for women with disabilities across various fields, equipping them with competitive skills for economic and social empowerment.
16. Dual stigma arising from gender discrimination and disability stereotypes must be addressed through legal protections that combat intersectional discrimination.

In closing, these recommendations are globally relevant and broadly framed apart from the vulnerabilities pertaining to Palestinian women and girls. Those too, however, have broader resonance with other high conflict zones. It is our hope that in sharing them here they can be of value for civil society organizations, researchers, schools, governments and at the

interpersonal level. Moreover, the call for gender-specific interventions underscore what feminists have long understood about the limitations of a gender-neutral perspective. As Leduc points out:

Projects are never neutral in the way they are designed or in their social impact, as they reflect, among other things, the implementing organization's values and priorities, which embed androcentric assumptions. Projects assumed to follow neutral approaches usually fail to address the specific needs of gender groups and the constraints they face, leading to their concerns being overlooked and the potential to increase existing inequalities (2009).

By adopting a feminist intersectional from policy to legal reform, skills and capacity-training workshops, anti-stigma and empathy-building, organizations can address gender-specific stigmas, steering clear of the assumed objectivity of gender neutrality as they strive for inclusivity of women with disabilities across all realms of society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Breaking the Silence: Tackling Period Poverty in the Middle East - The Borgen Project- <https://borgenproject.org/period-poverty-in-the-middle-east/>

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## **Appendix 1: Interview questions for AKUN Members**

1. Kuwait is considered one of the more progressive Arab countries with regard to women. In your perspective, how did this come to be?
2. What was the inspiration for the creation of AKUN?
3. How does AKUN work? What is the role of the board? How do the organizations work together?
4. What have been some of the challenges faced by AKUN? How have they been addressed or are they being addressed?
5. What are the most significant achievements of AKUN over the last 30 years?
6. How did the issue of girls and women disabilities come to be essential concern for AKUN?
7. What do you think are the major challenges that remain for women in Kuwait?
8. How are the challenges different for different groups of women in addition to issues such as disability?
9. What are the long-term goals of AKUN?
10. What are the guiding perspectives that influence the direction of AKUN?
11. Have there been any major ideological divides at any time in the history of AKUN? Please explain.
12. What role does feminism play as a guiding philosophy and set of principles for AKUN? Are there particular types of feminism as well that are especially important such as Islamic feminism? What about ecofeminism? Intersectional feminism?
13. How is the climate crisis affecting different groups of women in Kuwait and does AKUN

address these concerns? If so, how?

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