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Palestinian disabled girls ‘among most excluded’

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A rehabilitation unit condemns a lack of help and support

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A NEW report has described the inadequacy of provision in [Palestine](#) for girls with [disabilities](#).

While many rights and services are enshrined in law or international convention, their actual delivery is often patchy or next to non-existent, according to the survey commissioned by the Jerusalem Princess Basma Centre, a child-focused national rehabilitation unit that promotes the integration and empowerment of children with disabilities and their families.

It reveals a regimen ranging from official and public lack of interest to physical violence and deprivation caused by the region’s continuing conflict.

The report, released late last year, says that, while significant reforms have been introduced in the past 20 years, they have yet to be “fully enjoyed” in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. “A range of physical, institutional, and attitudinal barriers, compounded by the overall volatile political context, hinder the access for disabled girls to education, health, and protection services and full inclusion in society.

“Girls, especially from resource-poor households, are among the most excluded groups in Palestine, experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and suffering from amplified forms of violence.”

Some families do not send their disabled older daughters to school for fear of their safety and protection from sexual violence and harassment. Cases of such [abuse](#) in families are believed to be higher among disabled girls, owing to “their heightened vulnerability, resulting from their impaired ability to report such crimes, and/or their inaccessibility to protection services, and the stigmatisation of disability”.

The report continues: “The limited availability of protective services including suitable shelters, may also stop them, as well as their caregivers, from reporting cases of abuse and exploitation. The insufficient attention to the phenomenon of violence against girls with disabilities at the policy level contributes to silencing this reality.”

Many aspects of the [UN](#) Convention on the Rights of the Child are included in Palestinian law. “However, financial resources and expertise to ensure its implementation both within the judicial system and in service delivery are still needed,” the report says. “Overall, the political will and commitment to address the needs of girls with disabilities remains limited.”

The survey, published by the Christian charity Embrace the Middle East, is based on a literature review and interviews with 27 institutions, from ministries and NGOs to academia and focus groups of disabled children and their parents.

“Sporadic” data suggested that funding for the whole disability sector was “almost negligible”. Although education has improved, disabled girls are often excluded from mainstream schools, many of which lack suitable lavatories or ramps. Some administrators refuse to enrol disabled children, and a lack of trained teachers and support staff means that learning outcomes are not guaranteed.

Accessing quality health services was difficult — a situation compounded in Gaza by the prolonged blockade, regular military assaults, and fuel and electricity crises. Health professionals, especially in primary health-care, were not sufficiently skilled or trained to detect many disabilities, especially multiple or more complex disabilities.

The report calls for greater investment in services, targeted care for women and girls, and close collaboration with the civil society through more positive and empowering representation for disabled girls through role-models, educators, and mentors, and through educational materials and the media.

Embrace’s Director of Programme and Partnerships, Jamie Eyre, said: “ Disabled girls are often simply missed out of official statistics so that the scale of the problem is not known. This report,

with its key recommendations . . . to ensure that girls are counted, will help guide the way forward so that young girls are not left behind.”

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