People with disabilities in Qatar: Empowerment, Aspirations, and Society’s Behaviour Influences

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Abstract
People with disabilities have become a critical, international phenomenon. People with disabilities are those who have a physical or mental condition which limits their movements, senses, or activities. This article is a discussion of the factors which influence the empowerment of Qatari people with disabilities. The Qatari government has gone a long way towards making people with disabilities valued and appreciated by providing opportunities for education and work. Qataris are also keen to apply the literal teachings of Islam, although Qatar’s tribal culture has an effective influence in dealing with people with disabilities. The analysis of the findings from the interviews with charitable organisations’ staff members showed that Qatari people with disabilities still lack the empowerment to achieve their aims of being productive members of society. People with disabilities in Qatar desire a decent life which meets their basic needs such as healthcare, education, and job opportunities.

Keywords: Accessibility, Empowerment, People with Disabilities, Qatari Culture, Theological Impact

1. Introduction
People with disabilities do not differ in their aspirations to live, work, and co-exist with other members of society. They have the same desires to participate in daily life, develop their capabilities, and fulfil their aspirations to be as successful as anyone else. There are many people with physical or mental disabilities who have succeeded in contributing to society such as intellectuals, scholars, and writers. The Egyptian Taha Hussein (1889-1973) became blind at the age of two but was nominated fourteen times for the Nobel Prize in literature (Ghanayim, 1994).

The number of people with disabilities cases in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is expected to increase to about 40 million as a result of the continuing conflicts and wars over many years (Anan, 2018; Al-Rawi, 2019). The authors also confirm that people with disabilities live under challenging conditions. The number of people in Qatar with disabilities is also increasing every year. It reached 33,748 in 2020, according to the Planning and Statistics Authority State of Qatar report (2020). The major influences
for this increase are the emerging political, economic, and social factors (Caldwell et al., 2016).

We aim to discuss how the factors of international and national law, theological influences, training institutes, and Qatari behaviour and attitude influence the empowerment of Qatari people with disabilities. To achieve this aim, we displayed the experiences of both staff members from different charitable organisations, as well as observations of people with disabilities in Qatari society as a result of our investigation. We also examined and analysed how the Qatari government contributed to the empowerment of people with disabilities; how Islamic teachings influenced the behaviour of Qatari society in dealing with people with disabilities; and how Qatari culture affected the empowerment and co-existence of people with disabilities. Finally, we offered some recommendations which we believe would help both policy-makers as well as people with disabilities address the challenges facing them.

The terms 'disabled' and 'handicap', as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in reference to people who are physically or mentally impaired, and in texts concerning the relevant laws regarding these concepts, have been incorporated under an umbrella term (WHO, 1980): ‘people with disabilities’ for the purposes of this research.

2. The International Concepts of People with Disabilities

It is essential to consider the international definition and laws regarding people with disabilities, before discussing the laws in Qatar. This will help us to understand the universal notion of people with disabilities and the rights and benefits to which they are entitled. International laws will be the defining standards that underpin people with disabilities’ concept of empowerment in Qatar.

According to WHO: ‘Disabilities is an umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 defines a disabled person as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2007; Disabled World, 2009). The definition covers physical and mental impairments. Physical impairments affecting the senses such as speech, hearing or eyesight, heart disease, diabetes, epilepsy, mobility - moving from place to place, manual dexterity - for example, use of the hands, wrists or fingers, physical co-ordination, continence, the ability to lift, and carry or move ordinary objects. Mental impairments including learning disabilities and mental ill health, memory, or ability to concentrate, learn or understand, being able to recognise physical danger. WHO (2021) updated Disabled World’s (2009) definition of impairment as a problem in body function or structure; an activity as a limitation encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; and participation restriction as a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.
The 1975 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stated that they have the right to vocational training and qualifications, and to counselling and employment services. They also have the right to obtain and retain employment or to pursue a beneficial, profitable, and rewarding profession. The report emphasised that these rights should apply to all people with disabilities, regardless of gender, age, or race (OHCHR, 1975). According to United States Code of Laws (U.S.C.) Rehabilitation Act 29 No. 701(a)(3), ‘Disability is a natural part of human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to live independently; enjoy self-determination; make choices; contribute to society; pursue meaningful careers; and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society’ (Novak, 2015, p. 94).

International laws have provided a clear definition of who is considered people with disabilities, what their rights are in society, and how the State and society can empower them to be independent. People with disability is a complex phenomenon, however, as it reflects an interaction not only between the features of a person's body or mental state, but also the attitude of the society in which they live. Viriri and Makurumidze (2014) say that in Zimbabwe, entrepreneurship is relatively unfamiliar for people with disabilities or special needs organisations (such as support services and social foundations). The authors add that people with disabilities are the most overlooked group, and they are not only socially excluded, but also happen to be the poorest group in society. The study of people with disabilities in Sweden, on the other hand, suggests that entrepreneurs with disabilities can be as successful (or almost as successful) as other businessmen and businesswomen, given the opportunities. The study on disability management programmes recommended that entrepreneurship should be seen as an option for people with disabilities to develop, organise, and run a business enterprise in order to make a profit (Larsson, 2006). The two examples of Zimbabwe and Sweden’s people with disabilities, however, do not have the same opportunities in their societies; each society has its own characteristics and behavioural patterns in dealing with people with disabilities; in addition, the government of each country differs from others in supporting people with disabilities. The potential of providing equal opportunities for people with disabilities participation in the occupational marketplace (the ability and readiness to run a business enterprise) is underpinned by political, economic, and social factors (Caldwell et al., 2016).

Qataris likewise have their own characteristics, behavioural patterns, and a government which has its own strategies for dealing with people with disabilities. To investigate the factors that have had an influence on people with disabilities in Qatar, we have adopted a triangulation design – a combination of multiple research methods to obtain independent information from different viewpoints. This combination included interviews (through the snowball technique – Oppong, 2013) with specialists who had direct contact with people with disabilities themselves, and personal observations. The
3. Research Method

We have adopted a qualitative approach of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews to obtain the relevant information required for this research. This individual approach allowed the interviewees complete freedom to openly express themselves without restrictions. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies by the researcher Noura Aljomaa (2019-2020). Each interviewee was over 18 years old; an information sheet was provided, and a signed consent form was obtained from each participant, in accordance with ethical and legal requirements.

The original intention was to interview 30 specialists (staff members of various charitable institutions), but only 12 from four centres accepted our invitation: Qatar Paralympic Committee, Injaz Qatar, Best Buddies, Shafallah, andNamaa Centre. The reasons given for declining to be interviewed varied from obtaining approval from the authorities was too time-consuming; the nature of the interviews was too personal; the limit by Shafallah and others to four respondents from each Centre; and the perceived inability to provide useful information due to the lack of involvement in the subject. Fifteen Qatari citizens and residents with disabilities were contacted. Nine did not answer the phone calls; one refused to be interviewed, and two initially agreed but withdrew by turning off their phones. We emphasised complete confidentiality, to no avail. They did not give any reasons, but we would suggest their decisions may have been influenced by tribal or cultural factors. We only received approval from three people with disabilities respondents: the fourth was through communication with the people with disability’s mother.

The data were collected from 16 interviews with consenting participants: a mother of a disabled child, three individuals with disabilities, and 12 staff members from different charitable organisations. To respect the confidentiality of participants, they have been given pseudonyms.

4. Theoretical Framework

We have focused on sociology – the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and effects of human behaviour - to illustrate the need for more support and encouragement for people with disabilities to control their own lives and claim their rights. The framework of this article is on sociology, and the sociology of Islam as a disciplinary approach which will help to discover and understand the behaviour of Qatari citizens and residents who believe in Islamic teaching, and how they practice Islam within society. The meaning of ethics, values, and morality are also significant, as they explain the relationships between believers and their communities and how religion – Islam, in this case - deals with state governments, society, and culture in Muslim-majority countries (Haqqi, 2015). The examination through a sociological lens gives a clear image of the
relationship between society and human behaviour, raising points on the issues humans face in society (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011).

5. Qatar's People with Disabilities Support Strategy

Qatar is a wealthy country located on a peninsula in the Middle East, sharing a land border with Saudi Arabia and maritime borders with Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (Hukoomi, 2022a). Qatari society comprises a mixed population (Qatari nationals and non-Qatari residents) and reached 2,985,029 at the time of this research (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2022). Qatar issued a law in 2004 preserving the right to integration and co-existence of people with disabilities in society. This law gave people with disabilities the right to health services, education, and work opportunities. Qatar's second law of 2004 regarding people with disabilities provided for 'every person who has a permanent or total disability in any of his or her senses, or physical, psychological, or mental abilities [...] which limits his or her ability to learn, to rehabilitation or work' (Almeezan, 2004). This provision included special education for people with disabilities to meet their requirements and to support the development of their capabilities according to the extent of their disabilities. The Permanent Mission of the State of Qatar (2018) declared that Qatar was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008. The State has approved many plans and strategies for people with disabilities - the last of which was the National Autism Plan 2017-2021. The plan, together with other sectoral initiatives, aimed to improve the way of life for people with disabilities and their families. The rights of people with disabilities were also considered by various service agencies that wished to develop the capabilities of people with disabilities according to their impairments (Hassanein, 2018). These Qatari initiatives are promising first steps towards laying the foundations for empowering people with disabilities in Qatar; according to these initiatives, people with disabilities will be supported by their government in empowering them to be equal members of society. The development of the government's interest in the issue of people with disabilities found resonance among interviewees. Kareem, a charitable organisation staff member, said:

The situation of the disabled in Qatar is constantly improving, especially in the last ten years. They have access to anywhere and can enter a place like everyone else.

Indeed, this is what we observed regarding initiating tangible services for the disabled in public and private places in Qatar, such as paved areas at the entrances to buildings for wheelchairs, and services for communicating with the deaf. These examples indicate that Qatar is interested in empowering people with disabilities to be as independent as possible.

Doha's Permanent Population Committee reported that, among this population, the number of institutions caring for people with disabilities amounted to 34 bodies - government and non-government institutes (NGO) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). According to the Planning and Statisticians Authority in the State of Qatar reports on...
Qatari figures and labour force survey (2020), Qatari people with disabilities registered 33,748 compared to 16,163 in 2010. The increasing number of people with disabilities includes mental, movement, hearing, visual, and other disabilities. The report did not indicate the reasons that led to that increase; however, it may be due to the number of people fleeing wars and conflicts in neighbouring countries such as Syria and Egypt; these wars and conflicts inevitably result in cases of people with disabilities; on the other hand, the increase may be due to in-breeding – a custom preferred by the tribal culture of Qatari citizens (Fromherz, 2012). One of our interviewees, Ruba, a charitable organisation staff member said 'despite medical awareness to stay away from consanguineous marriages, there are a large number of disabled cases resulting from these marriages'. The patriarchal system in Qatar also has a strong influence on the culture. Ruba added 'some fathers insist on continuing to have children, despite warnings of disability [...] and some families have members with more than one disability'. This suggests that the Qatars' adherence to their consanguinity culture continues, despite the harm it may cause their children. It also means that Qatari culture has a strong influence on society. According to Fromherz, customs and traditions represented by a tribal culture have a marked effect on the behaviour of society (2012). The efforts made by the government and local organisations to protect the rights of people with disabilities in Qatar also face challenges from these attitudes and the behaviour of Qatari citizens. This affects all sectors - healthcare, education, and employment - the foundations upon which all people, including people with disabilities, can build their hopes of climbing the ladder to success in their communities.

6. Socio-religious Influences in Empowering People with Disabilities in Qatari Society

We observed the behaviour of Qatari society towards people with disabilities in public places such as malls and parks; their willingness to help the blind cross the street or voluntarily push wheelchairs, showed empathy for people with disabilities. The readiness of Qatars to help people with disabilities may emanate from their religious beliefs (Islamic teachings) or humanitarian concerns.

There are many texts in the Qur'an (sacred text of Islam) and Hadith (collected traditions of Prophet Muhammad) which mention people with disabilities and their importance in society. The Qur'an refers to a blind man, for instance, who did not receive special attention from the Prophet, for example, and how the Prophet is blamed for the blind man's affliction.

He frowned and turned away (1), that the blind man came to him (2). How could you know? Perhaps he would cleanse himself (3), or he might be mindful and good counsel might avail him (4). Now he who waxes indifferent (5), you attend to him (6), though you are not to blame if he would not cleanse himself (7). Nevertheless, he who comes to you running (8) and fears Allah (9), you pay no heed to him (10). (Abasa, 80: 1-10).
Islamic teachings were not merely prophetic words but were evident in the Prophet’s actions. He chose Muath Bin Jabal (lame in one foot) as judge and prince of Yemen (Sahih Al-Bukhari Vol. 4, Book 52, Hadith 145). Muath Bin Jabal's 'handicap' did not prevent him from being selected for a high position because he was given the opportunity, despite his disability.

We have considered that Qatar is one of the Arab societies with a Muslim majority, identifying itself as an Islamic State and following Shari'ah and the principles of Islam (Fromherz, 2012; Hukoomi, 2022a). We observed the behaviour of Qatari society towards people with disabilities in public places such as malls and parks; their willingness to help the blind cross the street or voluntarily push wheelchairs, showed empathy for people with disabilities.

This suggests that Qataris pay attention to Islamic teachings regarding people with disabilities; however, it does not mean that all Muslims behave similarly. The behaviour of Muslims is difficult to define or understand; for example, a Muslim may fast and eat only halal meat but may not regularly pray (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012). People inhabit the same world - they are united by human characteristics such as feelings and morals, which often direct their actions. Empathy with, and consideration of, people with disabilities have a humanitarian factor. We, as researchers, identified ourselves as Muslims, and our observations of prayer, for example, in Muslim-majority societies such as Palestine and Syria, do not mean that all Muslims pray; on the same lines, Qatari may observe the concept of people with disabilities according to Islamic teachings; however, the findings show that not all Qataris consider people with disabilities a priority. This study revealed that religion is not the only factor controlling Qatari behaviour; there are other factors which contribute to the decision-making of the Qatari in dealing with people with disabilities and empowering them to be part of society. One of our interviewees, Saad, a male Qatari citizen with disabilities, said: 'In Islamic [societies], and Arab societies, in particular, people with disabilities do not reach senior positions in the country, even if they are better [more qualified] than others'. One of the cultural influences on people with disabilities in Qatar was illustrated by several potential people with disabilities respondents in this research; even though they were over 18 years old (a government law), and assured of complete confidentiality, only three out of 15 people with disabilities agreed to be interviewed. The majority of the interviewees interpreted this as due to family control: some families do not want their disabled children to be seen by others. Mahmoud, a charitable organisation staff member, said:

Some parents still do not want their children to appear in public, even if they have achievements in a specific area. They [people with disabilities] are active, moving [mobile], and working.

The presence of a disabled member in the family may appear as a kind of parental weakness or failure in the eyes of society. Another Qatari cultural influence is that we, as researchers, had no choice in conducting the interviews except on a one-to-one basis. This ensured confidentiality and freedom of speech for the participants in a private meeting.
Talking freely about culture's impact on dealing with a disability was difficult for the participants. Qatari society (especially the citizens) is governed by customs and traditions of which they are proud. It is difficult for participants to speak openly about their criticism of these customs and traditions, particularly the feeling of being excluded by their fellow citizens. On the same line, members of charitable organisations, both government and NGO, explained the roots of these feelings of exclusion as being a deep-seated tradition based on superstition and ignorance.

There are some people with disabilities, however, who have been successful, despite their disabilities. Ghanim al-Muftah who suffers from caudal retrogression syndrome (impairment of the development of the lower half of the body) has enjoyed tremendous support from the Emir of Qatar. Ghanim al-Muftah established a civil association through which he distributes wheelchairs to those who need them. Ghanim Al-Muftah became influential by transcending the stage of arousing pity and sympathy from others, and instead, became active in facing his challenges. Ghanim Al-Muftah's website mentions that ‘Ghanim has gone further at embracing his condition, with his infectious smile, impeccable self-confidence, and his witty personality, he has become a social media sensation – with over three million followers across social platforms’ (Ghanim Al Muftah, 2022). It was essential to conduct this study on empowering the disabled in Qatar and to understand the factors involved in this empowerment. Al-Muftah was given the opportunity and support he needed, which suggests that people with disabilities in Qatar would be able to live a decent life that guaranteed them a fulfilling future, provided they were given the opportunities and support they required such as good healthcare, education, and training for the workplace. This does not mean all people with disabilities can achieve employment or a high position in society, but it does mean that they are entitled to the best care and consideration.

7. Discussion

We have focused on the factors that may contribute to a normal decent life for people with disabilities: health, education, and work. Richard Carmona, Surgeon-General of the United States in 2005, stated that ‘with good health, persons with disabilities have the freedom to work, learn and engage actively in their families and their communities’. A people with disabilities, without the appropriate and adequate healthcare, cannot enjoy life to the full; education and support are needed to develop not only their mental abilities, but also their physical competence. Carmona pointed out that, “good health opens the door to employment and education for persons with disabilities, just as it does for persons who do not have disabilities”. A thematic study on the right of persons with disabilities to education by the United Nations in 2013 stated that: ‘A mixed learning environment that includes persons with disabilities allows their contributions to be valued, and prejudices and misconceptions to be progressively challenged and dismantled’. The study also emphasised that, ‘Formal education facilitates formal certification, which is increasingly required by the open job market today’. Opportunities
for employment are enhanced by education, especially for people with disabilities. ‘Work allows disabled people to realize three significant determinants of their lives: financial, rehabilitation and social. Work has a crucial role for building their own image of themselves and acceptance; it can give a meaning to their lives. In addition, employment prevents social exclusion’ (Jasiak & Królak, 2018: 230). In this section, we have discussed the influence of Qatari society’s behaviour on healthcare, education, and work for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities in Qatar could achieve their aspirations and ambitions to be productive, successful, and valued members of society, instead of the perception of being a burden and dependent on society. Given the opportunities through the appropriate health, education, and work, they could achieve their goals, and dispel the notion of being a burden on society.

7.1 The Influence of Qatari Society’s Behaviour on Healthcare of People with Disabilities

The state provides all health services to people with disabilities and supports them with comprehensive healthcare. The Ministry of Public Health in Qatar has ensured that people with disabilities’ rights are included in all the provisions in the national health strategy. The Qatar Rehabilitation Centre is one of the outcomes of this strategy. It provides multiple services, including community support, job rehabilitation programmes, and research. Mental health has been given priority in health services, based on the results of studies conducted by the State according to the national strategic plan for mental health 2019-2022 (Ministry of Public Health, 2022). Mental health is considered especially important, although Mahmoud, a charitable organisation staff member, proposed that mobility disabilities should be considered equally important. He said:

It is the distribution of wheelchairs. No follow-up over the years [is conducted regarding] the usefulness of the same chair according to the age [growth] of the people with disabilities.

Zainat, mother of a people with disability, on the other hand, assured us that the health sector in Qatar is 'perfect', and keeps regular contact to ensure that her daughter is making the 'right' progress. Zainat pointed out that 'some parents do not care about their children with disabilities. The health centre keeps contacting them, but they refuse any follow-up'. There may be several reasons that could explain this behaviour such as the influence of Qatari culture; however, the importance of follow-up procedures is crucial to ensuring that people with disabilities are empowered to become functional (and even active) members of their societies. A growing child, for instance, needs a constant follow-up strategy to avoid developing other health problems; children who are wheelchair users are vulnerable to pressure ulcers, according to Mahmoud. The maintenance of healthcare is crucial to ensure that the condition of the disabled person does not deteriorate. Health follow-up care also helps to make people with disabilities more independent and able to engage with society, whatever disability they have, rather than becoming preoccupied
with successive health problems. Follow-up programmes are, in fact, essential at all stages of life, whether they involve healthcare or education.

7.2 The Influence of Qatari Society’s Behaviour on Education of People with Disabilities

The Qatari Ministry of Education and Higher Education focuses on supporting schools with disability service; various agencies co-operate in supplying schools and study centres with medical equipment and teaching programmes in addition to providing support in other cases which require particular help at home. The role played by the Mada Centre in Assistive Technology (AT) is an example of this particular support. The Centre makes a considerable effort to help people with disabilities achieve their goals, such as independent living and equal opportunities in education and work. It also supports training people with disabilities to not only develop their skills but also on how to use them; equal opportunities and justice have become central issues in all contemporary societies (Hukoomi, 2022b). Qatar University (2022) has also recognised that people with disabilities have the right to higher education opportunities, and provides support through the Inclusion And Special Need Support Centre. The University encourages applications from disabled students and those with special needs, including those with visible and invisible disabilities such as (temporary) physical injuries, chronic diseases, learning disabilities, and attention-deficit hyperactivity (ADHD) (Qatar University, 2022).

Nasir, a sports trainer in one of the charitable organisations, praised the education sector regarding people with disabilities in Qatar. He said, ‘there are many people with disabilities in Qatar who have a high level of education’. Nasir suggests that education has a place in fulfilling the aspirations of people with disabilities if they are given the opportunity; but there are several obstacles that prevent many people with disabilities from reaching their goals; the feelings of shame experienced by parents and families, according to Mahmoud, and the impact these feelings have on formal education for people with disabilities, rather than learning a craft or trade. Salma, a charitable organisation staff member, said:

The parents of people with disabilities pay more attention to industrial crafts than [formal] education […] these parents are scared about their kids' futures, and they believe that the trade [sector] is much better than education.

Ancient Qatari history is famous for its trade, especially pearl diving and fishing (Fromherz, 2012). The experiences of Qatari (citizen) parents of people with disabilities may guide them in making these assumptions regarding their children. They may believe that people with disabilities are more successful in the trade sector than in receiving education. Hasnaa, a charitable organisation staff member, said:

Parents cannot deal with their (disabled) children or those with special needs, and they sometimes consider it a failure because some of them [the children] are not successful in school.

The lack of success in education pushes parents to turn their disabled children towards trades and crafts, especially since Qatar is considered to be a wealthy country in
which wealth and inherited trades go hand-in-hand. The inappropriate treatment at school also drives parents to avoid educating their disabled children. Ruba confirmed this: ‘Some classmates provoke people with disabilities [...] so we put [them] under the instructor’s supervision’. This has occurred despite Islamic teachings, which stipulate consideration of the psychological aspect of people with disabilities. Islam forbids defaming oneself or insulting one another by using nicknames, as mentioned in the Qur’an:

Believers, let not a group (of men) scoff at another group; it may well be that the latter (at whom they scoff) are better than they, nor let a group of women scoff at another group; it may well be that the latter are better than they. Furthermore, do not taunt one another nor revile one another by nicknames. It is an evil thing to gain notoriety for ungodliness after belief. Those who do not repent are indeed the wrong-doers (Al-Hujurat, 49:11).

The evidence shows that revealing the existence of people with disabilities in the family, or exclusion practices involving people with disabilities, causes a state of mental and emotional anguish, social disapproval, and a pessimistic outlook on life. Forbidding this mockery represents a spiritual guarantee of acceptance of people with disabilities, and helps them to adapt to their disabilities. It also helps to prevent exclusion by society and goes some way to relieving the added burden of their disability.

According to Hasnaa: ‘Qatari society lacks awareness of the capabilities of people with disabilities’. She added, ‘people are often surprised by some people with disabilities’ abilities to work’. This lack of awareness of the need to integrate and empower people with disabilities in Qatar cannot be generalised; there are also successful cases of parents supporting their children with disabilities or special needs. Saad, a male Qatari citizen with disabilities, said:

The State and the family have had a positive role in my life - from distributing educational equipment and programmes after my injury to material and psychological support.

This was confirmed by Saeed, another male Qatari citizen with disabilities:

I have many friends […]. I have very good relationships, love, support, and encouragement - always going out and meeting with friends.

Saeed and Saad both explained that there are some Qatari families who support their children along the path of success. Qatari people with disabilities will be able to fulfil their aspirations if they are given the means to succeed. The reluctance of some Qatari families for supporting and assisting their disabled children to achieve their goals is influenced by customs and traditions, rather than the right to equal liberty and security afforded to other members of Qatari society. It is necessary to educate both parents and people with disabilities on the opportunities (and challenges) available; constant support and adequate training for disabled students preparing for adult life; furthermore, spreading awareness of the Islamic teachings to Qatari society about people with
disabilities, as well as their integration into society, would go some way in changing Qatari attitudes and behaviour towards people with disabilities.

According to Mahmoud, a charitable organisation staff member, however, the problem does not only lie in education: providing job opportunities after obtaining educational certificates is another challenging factor. Mahmoud said that most people with disabilities have certificates and field training, but lack job opportunities. This indicates that, despite obtaining the appropriate education and skills, people with disabilities still face difficulties finding suitable jobs (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2017).

7.3 The Influence of Qatari Society’s Behaviour on Work for People with Disabilities

The Qatari State passed a law in 2004 obligating all government agencies to allocate two per cent of jobs to people with disabilities capable of working. There is a work team and a committee comprising the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Public Health, which not only determine the jobs people with disabilities can safely perform, but also the role they can play in the workplace (Gulf-Times, 2017). There are quasi-governmental organisations in Qatar that provide services for people with disabilities. These institutions work with people with disabilities and help them to make plans for their integration into society. Their approach is based on accurate field survey data gathered from time to time. This programme includes the model disability survey implemented by the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics (October 2017) in co-operation with Mada (Assistive Technology Centre, Qatar) and WHO (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). The bodies which support or assist people with disabilities are the local centres and organisations in Qatar, such as Shafallah (one of the largest centres specialising in children with physical and mental disabilities – Shafallah, 2020), and Qatar Social and Cultural Centre for the Blind (QSCCB, 2016). Hamed, a charitable organisation staff member, confirmed this:

One of Shafallah’s activities is [paying] attention to [people with disabilities] skills, where continuous training is provided at the Shafallah Centre. We train them in a ‘real work’ environment, and they thus gain [real-life] experience.

Omia, a charitable organisation staff member, agreed with Hamed, and said that the Shafallah Centre was able to provide sixty jobs in Qatar Airways. The majority of our interviewees were positive about the organisation’s support and work with people with disabilities, but providing job opportunities was not enough; they said that follow-up procedures were crucial if people with disabilities were to be empowered to have a sustainable living. Education and training have an important place in the work environment; it has little or no merit, however, if it does not result in employment. Ruba also explained that one of the obstacles facing the work environment was focusing on training people with disabilities, rather than providing employment. People with disabilities require the opportunity to work, or at least live a fulfilling life if they were unable to work. Government aid provision to individual people with disability is only the
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first step towards their empowerment. Mahmoud, a charitable organisation staff member, confirmed this:

There is no employment for people with disabilities like the rest [of the population]. They have certificates and qualifications which allow them to work like the rest, but the community [has a negative] view and refuses to employ people with disabilities.

Afif, a charitable organisation staff member, added:

Government [employment] agencies [accept applications from] people with disabilities and are understanding […]; as for the private bodies, there is a lack of acceptance in some of the workplaces.

It is not sufficient to empower people with disabilities in Qatari society, despite the law; the provision of an appropriate environment which guarantees the right to work is also required. Job opportunities must be available to all members of society to work without selective choices. The psychological burden of ‘feeling left out’ because an individual is merely a disabled person is not only harmful, but will also affect his or her future. This unfair or prejudicial treatment of people with disabilities may have pushed them to work in the private sector. This explains the percentages mentioned in the 2017 report on statistical data for 2010. The report shows that the percentage of people with disabilities working in the private sector is 54.6 per cent - 22.6 per cent in the government sector, while 22.8 per cent work in other sectors (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2017). The private sector will provide people with disabilities the freedom and dignity in a society with a negative view, either directly or indirectly.

The private sector is not without its own challenges. The behaviour of some people with disabilities in the workplace also contributed to the unwillingness to employ them. Mahmoud, a charitable organisation staff member, mentioned that ‘one of the obstacles for people with disabilities to find work is the behaviour of some people with disabilities’. We tried to obtain answers or explanations about this point from some of our interviewees, but they were not willing to disclose their thoughts. The assumption, therefore, can only be that people with disabilities health condition (mobility or limited mental capacity), and the lack of appropriate equipment or facilities in the workplace prevented them from being employed; although they may have the same qualifications on paper as the other members of the workforce, but were denied job opportunities because of their disabilities.

Employers, on the other hand, may not be prepared to re-organise the workplace to accommodate people with disabilities by providing the necessary equipment or specialised staff training: a small business may not have the necessary funds to provide a safe work environment for people with disabilities compared to a government institution. Employers may have a negative attitude towards people with disabilities such as the belief that they are unreliable due to their disabilities. There may also be the lack of appropriate transport for people with disabilities to and from the workplace, which may validate some of these concerns. The fact remains that, whatever the reasons, if people
with disabilities were given a chance, they could at least attempt to co-exist and integrate with the rest of society. It is possible for (some) people with disabilities to become productive workers with support, training and guidance from employers, as well as encouragement from the authorities and parents. Ruba confirmed this by saying, ‘with their parents’ support, people with disabilities were trained in an authentic work environment before applying for a job. They not only gained ‘real’ work experience, but their level of performance and capabilities became evident. Providing a genuine work environment for people with disabilities is the first step towards inclusion; training and appropriate facilities are not enough to empower them: society also bears a specific responsibility to accept people with disabilities by helping them to empower themselves, regardless of their age, gender, or disabilities.

The findings revealed that the influence of Qatari cultural characteristics also focused on the male gender of people with disabilities. The behaviour of Qatari society regarding male domination is one of the features of tribalism (Fromherz, 2012). The role gender played in Qatar is, therefore, relevant, especially for people with disabilities. Mahmoud pointed out that gender was a significant factor in the workplace and sports. The dilemma that females with disabilities face is the lack of recognition by the family for their right to empowerment. Hadi, a charitable organisation staff member, mentioned that 'some families refuse to [consider] some women with [disabilities or] special needs for training, work management, or starting work'. This research did not examine the empowerment of females with disabilities, but not all Qataris have the same personal feelings and convictions. There are inevitably some Qatari families who support their disabled daughters in empowering them, such as Kholoud Abu Sharida. Sharida was born blind, but made her voice heard in society by being able to develop her passion for languages, thanks to the opportunity offered by Hamad bin Halifa University (HBKU) to study translations. Sharida is currently working as assistant producer at Baraem TV channel, and is Vice-President of Qatar Social Cultural Centre for the Blind (QSCCB) (Rao, 2018). Sharida proves that having a disability should not be a barrier to education, provided there is the opportunity and support available. Females with disabilities in Qatari society, on the whole, not only suffer from a lack of awareness of their situation, but also experience less consideration. This leads to not only feelings of despair by female people with disabilities, but also hopelessness of ever being part of society, and the effect of subconscious behaviour owing to tribal culture, on the other. The suggestion here is that the behaviour of the whole of society will eventually be affected. People with disabilities will consequently be left behind at home by their families and the external community, such as in the workplace.

Qatari residents’ cultural characteristics also affect their opinions regarding people with disabilities. They come from several different cultures, according to their countries of origin, such as Egypt and India (De Bel-Air, 2014). Our observations showed that residents were interested in acquiring all rights for the disabled in Qatar, including the Qatari laws which support people with disabilities, regardless of their cultural
backgrounds. Zainat, a resident and mother of a people with disability, said that her daughter enjoyed all the rights given to people with disabilities in Qatar. She pointed out that the advantages Qatari residents generally experienced were more significant than those in their countries of origin; however, the bias towards Qatari citizens was evident regarding employment opportunities, based on our observations of the parents of people with disabilities. Qatari people with disabilities residents were less fortunate than citizens with disabilities: disabled residents were less successful in securing jobs than disabled citizens. This distinction also extended to public life, such as health and education in Qatari society. Our attempts to discuss this discrepancy with the parents of disabled residents refused. The resident parents of disabled children declined to officially participate in any interviews, despite reassuring them of anonymity and confidentiality; however, we were able to obtain their views 'off the record'. They claimed official interviews would cause many problems, such as the conflict between them and Qatari citizens, or fear of losing their jobs and subsequent deportation. They also pointed out that opportunities for people with disabilities in Qatar were far more significant than in their countries of origin. This attitude contradicts Islamic teachings which encourage equality among all people, regardless of age, sect, colour, or gender. This suggests that many resident people with disabilities w likely to be disadvantaged in some way, even though they had been prepared for work through government-sponsored training programmes by charitable organisations. According to some of the respondents, this situation had psychological effects on people with disabilities such as lack of self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness.

8. Factors Affecting the Empowerment of the People with Disabilities in Qatari Society and Its Implication with other Societies

The Qatari government’s concern regarding people with disabilities was evident: it introduced laws to help integrate people with disabilities into society and to contribute to their empowerment. The laws also made provisions for healthcare, amenities, and tools that would facilitate their education and work, but there is a difference between the policies of the Qatari government and reality. The protection of people with disabilities became a means of establishing equality among members of the community, and is a principle affirmed by Qatar in its constitution and national laws: confirmation that the role of the government is not limited to issuing laws and directives to institutions and companies dealing with people with disabilities, it also recognises their importance in an inclusive society.
Empowerment of PWD in Qatar

Private Sector  Qatari Laws  Tribal Culture  Islamic Teachings

Government and Local Organisations  International Attitudes  Empowerment of PWD in Qatar  Individual Behaviour

Figure (1): Factors affecting the empowerment of people with disabilities in Qatar, most notably Qatari culture.

Figure (1) shows that Qatari society is not only subject to these laws but also to tribal culture, Islamic teachings, government policies, local organisations, international institutions, the private sector, and individual behaviour; they all intersect and have an impact on the experience of people with disabilities in Qatar. Qatar is capable of providing for the needs of people with disabilities, which could effectively contribute to empowering them. The awareness of their needs by Qatari society, employers, the government, and appropriate healthcare such as follow-up strategies would enable people with disabilities to work, or at least enjoy a productive life, without feeling undervalued, provided they were given the encouragement, especially by their parents, and acceptance by the community.

The results of this research highlighted several issues regarding the empowerment of the disabled. The issue of empowering the disabled is a universal phenomenon, not only in Muslim-majority societies such as in Qatar, but also in non-Muslim societies. People with disabilities are present all over the world, and their numbers are increasing by the day (Anan, 2018; Taha, 2019). The tribal culture and Islamic teachings are the main influencing factors regarding the empowerment of the disabled in Qatari society, although there are various individual considerations such as moral, medical, and social (Olkin, 2002); each model addresses the perceived causes of disability, responses to it, and deeper meanings: the belief that it may be a form of retribution for an action in a past life, for instance, or something a parent has done which makes cultural beliefs and practices difficult to separate from disablement. Stigma can result from negative attitudes and misconceptions or ignorance of the causes of disablement; people with disabilities are either regarded as ‘undesirable’ or having a lower status in the community. Empowerment of people with disabilities, and their integration, is therefore essential in an inclusive society.

The findings of this study may present some similarities with other Muslim societies in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. Qatari society is known for being Islamic with a Sunnah majority, although its citizens and residents may belong to different branches of Islam and different cultures (Fromherz, 2012; Hukoomi, 2022a). Empowering people with disabilities in Qatar in 2022 could help to include societies that
share at least one of these cultures. The findings contribute to the understanding and studying of empowering people with disabilities in societies possessing similar demographics and characteristics as Qatari society, such as Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

9. Recommendations for Policy-makers and People with Disabilities

The recommendations are for four parties in the article, namely PWD, community members, government, and religious institutions. Islamic teachings, government protocols, and international laws are the foundations for dealing with the integration and empowerment of people with disabilities in Qatar. The responsibility lies with several parties: parents, the Qatari government, and to a greater extent, society, to empower them. The moral and even material support of families and society are not sufficient on their own to achieve this objective to ensure a good future for them. They require government initiatives and support as well as encouragement and support from parents and the community if they are to achieve their aspirations of being valued members of society. The provision of the appropriate conditions would not only give people with disabilities the freedom to work and provide for their future, but also help to eliminate the low self-esteem and sense of hopelessness they feel.

Empowering people with disabilities in the twenty-first century is a vital component of society. An awareness strategy by both the Qatari government, people with disabilities institutions, and even families and parents would help to encourage Qataris to accept people with disabilities as part of society would be the first step towards their empowerment.

Spreading more awareness of people with disabilities by Muslim scholars in Qatar would also be helpful. Qatari society is a religious one which adheres to the teachings of Islam, particularly in this case, with support and justice for people with disabilities.

Research on Qatari female disabled people is also required as part of an empowerment plan. Females with disabilities often feel they are the ‘forgotten group’ in Qatar, arguably because of the male-dominated society in which they live. The exploration of other reasons would help to understand this phenomenon.

The right equipment for people with disabilities is crucial if they are to develop their potential and be happy in their environment - a wheelchair for a child is not suitable for a teenager, for instance. This specialised equipment needs to be monitored at regular intervals. A commission or para-governmental department could be set up to evaluate and assess people with disabilities’ requirements, and provide funding to alleviate this problem.

The problems faced by people with disabilities in Qatar need further investigation by the government. Qatar has made some legal provisions for people with disabilities; additional investment is required to allow them to achieve their goals of being happy at
least (if they are unable to work) or productive members of the community if they are able to work.

Training institutes do their best to prepare people with disabilities for the workplace: they provide ‘real life’ experiences in preparation for the world of work. Qatar law states that at least two per cent of the work force should include people with disabilities. Consideration of people with disabilities by the Qatari government to add an employment law to its institutions and the private sector would go a long way, not only by to empowering people with disabilities, but also integrating them into Qatari society. People with disabilities face many obstacles as employees. They will require appropriate equipment to facilitate freedom of movement, for instance, a safe working environment, and acceptance and co-operation by both their colleagues and their communities. Employers will also require encouragement and financial support to engage people with disabilities, and provide a suitable work environment for them.

10. Conclusion

We have investigated the factors of Qatari law, Islamic teachings, training institutes (government and non-government institutes (NGO)), and Qatari behaviour and attitude that influenced the empowerment of Qatari people with disabilities. We also have investigated the situation of people with disabilities (both citizens and residents) in Qatar through the opinions of government and NGO staff members. The choice of Qatar for this study was an opportunity to examine the nature of people with disabilities empowerment in a country with a Muslim-majority population, influenced by an Islamic identity and tribal customs and norms. Qatari society enjoys Islamic characteristics and laws which underpin the needs of people with disabilities; it also has the potential to provide and support them with the requirements. Islamic teachings (Abasa, 80: 1-10) focus on people with disabilities; international law such as WHO protects the rights of people with disabilities in society; Qatari government law in 2004 preserved the right for people with disabilities to integrate and co-exist in society, but the privileges they obtained in healthcare, education, and work, were not sufficient to empower them within that society. The main reasons given were Qatari culture and the tribal system practiced by the citizens as the strongest influences on the behaviour of society towards people with disabilities. These influences played a significant role in curbing or ignoring the rights of people with disabilities in Qatar regarding health, education, and work opportunities, according to some of the people with disabilities cases who claim there is a lack of interest in them, or the shame and embarrassment felt by their families in allowing them to appear in public.

There is little or no follow-up strategy for people with disabilities who need new equipment as their physical circumstances change; some people with disabilities had outgrown their wheelchairs, for instance, which made it difficult for them to work or live as ‘normal’ a life as possible. This was a serious concern according to some people with disabilities institutions as they received little or no co-operation from parents of people
with disabilities. Employers claim that they are unable to provide the appropriate facilities and amenities to accommodate people with disabilities (suitable office equipment, supervisors). There is insufficient government supervision and financial support to guarantee the rights of people with disabilities in work placements. Teenagers and adults with disabilities are trained, monitored by experts, and equipped for the workplace. They are provided with competence certificates to prove they are capable of working – to no avail. Employers prefer able-bodied men and women to people with disabilities; trained female people with disabilities are much less likely to find employment in the private sector.

We found that Qatari’s people with disabilities have desires to participate in daily life, develop their skills, and achieve success as much as anyone else in any society. They have the capability and are willing to earn a living to support their families, provided they receive help and encouragement from their families and the appropriate training, facilities, and equipment provided by the government and others. Qataris’ acceptance of people with disabilities and belief in their ability to contribute to society would help with their integration. The government has its role, but ‘one man alone cannot solve the problem’. A joint effort by the Qatari government, local institutions, families, and a people with disability co-existence strategy within the community would lead to the achievement of their empowerment in one of the wealthiest Muslim countries. Equality in terms of citizens and residents, males and females, is crucial for people with disabilities to become part of a thriving society in Qatar.

References


