

## Empowerment journeys of women with disabilities: A case-study

Arianna Taddei\*

### Abstract

Social inclusion of women with disabilities is currently an extremely complex challenge, an *educational emergency*, which mainly involves Special Education. The development of the international normative framework did not help the majority of women with disabilities, who are still socially underprivileged and are often victims of multi-discrimination, which is part of an extensive process of *feminization of poverty*. Starting from the above mentioned daunting overview, the article aims at contributing to the debate on the need to reinforce a theoretical and methodological framework of interpretation. Such framework should be able to link the conditions of *gender* and *disability* together, thus pursuing an emancipating perspective.

The article aspires to reflect on potential perspectives of social development, combining and balancing social protection elements with educational and employment opportunities through empowerment processes designed for women with disabilities. Such reflection will move its steps from the case-study on a journey of social and employment inclusion embraced by women with disabilities living in the difficult context of Gaza Strip.

**Key words:** women, disability, rights, empowerment, inclusion, employment, emancipation.

### Introduction

Social inclusion of women with disabilities is currently an extremely complex challenge, an *educational emergency*, which mainly involves Special Education. Such branch of education studies the contexts of life of people with disabilities, their own individual and social needs, and the relevant subjective and objective existential dimensions. Its purpose is to create inclusive journeys guaranteeing Quality of Life (Jones et al., 2018; Giaconi, 2015; Shalock & Verdugo Alonso, 2002), as much as possible through effective social engagement for everyone to acknowledge the rights of one another.

\* The author is researcher in Didactics and Special Pedagogy at the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism of Macerata University.

The article aims at contributing to the debate on the need for a theoretical and methodological framework of interpretation able to understand the difficult conditions of women with disabilities under theoretical, conceptual and methodological points of view, thus pursuing an emancipating perspective.

The analysis of the international cooperation project “We Work: the social and economic inclusion of women with disabilities in Gaza Strip”, which was carried out in Palestine from 2016 to 2018, is below presented with the aim of triggering and fostering the above mentioned debate<sup>1</sup>. Such project is fulfilled as an educational intervention by a group of Italian and Palestinian members of civil society, local institutions and by international and local Disable People Organisations. The key participants of the project are Palestinian women with disabilities. The reason behind the choice of such a case-study lies on the will to focus on some of the crucial arguments offered by this analysis, according to which gender issues and disability condition are to be interpreted as continuously evolving social and cultural constructs influenced by the relevant context (Barbuto, 2006; Griffo, 2018, Oliver, 1990,1996). The conditions of *gender* and *disability* are indeed social and cultural constructs only partly caused by biological factors, as emphasized by Garland-Thomson (2002, 2005) as well. This means that the conditions of vulnerability and/or inadequacy are not systematically generated by being disabled nor by being a woman, but by the individual's encounter with society, and especially with the barriers hindering the inclusion of differences of any kind.

Which criticalities can be identified particularly when the word pair *disability-poverty* encounters the variable *gender*? The first monitoring report (UN, 2018) on the life conditions of people with disabilities according to the Agenda 2030<sup>2</sup> (UN, 2015) underlines how the category of people with disabilities, especially women, are constantly underprivileged. The results of the SDG 5 implementation “Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls with disabilities” confirm that women with disabilities are often victims of multiple types of discrimination due both to their gender and disability conditions (UN, 2018, p.7). The above outlined overview shows an

<sup>1</sup> The project has been funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS - Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo). The Italian NGO EducAid promoted such initiative. Local partners are: the Gaza Chamber of Commerce and Industry; the NGO Social Development Fund (SDF), empowerment expert in the field of media for underprivileged population categories; the NGO El Amal Rehabilitation Society (Elamal) working with people affected by hearing loss. Palestinian Ministries of Employment, Education, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities participated in the project implementation. The project will be quoted with the concise wording “We Work” in the article.

<sup>2</sup> The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are the focus of the UN 2030 Agenda.

alarming trend towards the *feminization* of poverty.<sup>3</sup> Only systematic measures able to combine and balance social protection elements with educational and employment opportunities and to implement empowerment processes for women with disabilities can combat such phenomenon.

The empowerment perspective of women with disability clearly needs to be addressed also at normative level. The *Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities - CRPD* (UN, 2006) is, as a matter of fact, the most advanced normative measure able to influence and review national and international policies. The Convention represents the result of a striving effort to the acknowledgement of people with disabilities human rights.<sup>4</sup> The significant weight given by CRPD to gender issues is undeniable, as it is a *mainstreaming* topic, or rather transferable to the cultural and political contents of the Convention<sup>5</sup>. As is known, Europe has implemented the CRPD principles in the *European Disability Strategy 2010-2020*, which was adopted by the European Commission (EU, 2010). The normative documents defending the status of women at international level are many (Taddei, 2017, pp.21-36). However, it is only during the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) that the issue of women with disabilities has been explicitly taken into account for the first time, as outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action document.

With regards to the Italian context, the CRPD has been ratified in 2009 (through Law n.18, March 3rd, 2009). An early evaluation of the Convention implementation has underlined the lack of measures designed to meet the specific needs of women with disabilities (UN, 2016). Lastly, violence and other issues concerning the protection of women with disabilities rights have been the main topics of the two Manifestos on the Rights of Women and Girls with Disabilities in the European Union, which have been drafted during the *European Disability Forum*.<sup>6</sup> The *First Manifesto of women with disabilities*

<sup>3</sup> European studies (EU, 2017; EIGE 2016) foresee that 120 million people will be affected by a disability in 2020 and such increase will be observable more on women rather than men (29.5% vs 24.5%).

<sup>4</sup> CRPD principles are inspired by the Declaration of Human Rights (Unesco,1948) and, later, by the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (UN, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Article 6 of CRPD, in particular, declares the following: “1. States Parties recognise that women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination, and in this regard shall take measures to ensure the full and equal enjoyment by them of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. 2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the full development, advancement and empowerment of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the present Convention”.

<sup>6</sup> The *European Disability Forum*, established in 1996, is a European non-governmental organisation aiming at protecting people with disabilities rights: <http://www.edf-feph.org/>.

(1997) had the merit of shifting the focus on the life conditions of women. The *Second Manifesto* (2011), which stemmed from the adoption of the CRPD, offered to reinforce the “promotion of women with disabilities emancipation and to underline the need to act in this field” (Lancioni, p.4, It. transl., 2017), as emphasized by Simona Lancioni.

### **Theoretical and methodological framework**

The following paragraph intends to mainly pursue two objectives. On one hand, it aims at prospecting a theoretical and conceptual analysis of a holistic nature, able to combine gender with disability dimensions, which will be pursued in an attempt not to fall into a narrow reflection considering categories of separate analyses, such as the *Disabilities Studies* (Adams *et al.*, 2015; Medeghini, D’Alessio, Marra, Vadalà, Valtellina, 2013; Watson *et al.*, 2012) or the *Feminist Studies* (Lykke, 2010; Crespi, 2006; de Laurentis, 1986). On the other hand, it aspires to introduce the methodological grounds which should not only see their realisation in the case-study, but also entail the design process of inter-sectoral projects able to respond to the complex identity of women with disabilities, pursuing an emancipating perspective (Griffo, Barbuto *et al.* 2018, Cottini, 2016; RIDS, 2015).

#### *Gender perspective and disability: theoretical prerequisites*

Women with disabilities represented and still represent “the excluded par excellence” due to an elaborate combination of discriminations, *such as disability, gender and poverty*, as argued by various studies (Galati *et al.*, 2003; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Mura, 2017, Malaguti, 2011; USAID, 2012; EIGE, 2016). According to Barbuto “discrimination against women with disabilities is the result of the convergence of different variables. On one hand, in the feminine universe women with disabilities are discriminated due to the disability variable not being considered. On the other hand, in the disability dimension these are discriminated due to the variable gender not being considered. Moreover, in the universe of women with disabilities, these are discriminated because the different languages, disabilities (mental and psychiatric) or environmental variables (coming from the rural areas or being a migrant) are not being acknowledged” (Barbuto, 2006, p.29).

The persistent lack of an analytical approach able to combine gender with disability issues during the centuries has led to the conditions for both dimensions to substantially become “invisible” or “mute”. Besides, neither

movements of people with disabilities nor feminist movements have been fostering the needs of this group for a long time (Davaki, Marzo *et al.*, 2013). Feminist movements in particular have not taken into account the experiences of women with disabilities, especially during the initial phase, even though they originally acknowledged the existence of multiple identities in the feminine world. As emphasized by Bernardini in her essay, “Corpi Muti” (2018), women with disabilities have not only been left unheard, but also exposed to vulnerable situations more often compared to men in the same condition. They are considered “weightless bodies on the justice scale” (Bernardini, 2018, p. 13), which have gained visibility in public life only in the last thirty years (Morris, 1991). Thanks to the *Feminist Disability Studies* movement - FDS (Hall, 2014; Garland-Thomson, 2005; Wendell, 1989) the condition of women with disabilities starts to be examined through a new lens overcoming the narrow approaches of the *Feminist Studies* (Lykke, 2010; Crespi, 2006; de Laurentis, 1986) and of the *Disability Studies* (Adams *et al.*, 2015; Medeghini, D’Alessio, Marra, Vadalà, Valtellina, 2013; Watson *et al.*, 2012). The first have indeed been criticised for pursuing the fight against sexism declaring a subject-woman of an absolute normal, but also neutral, nature. The second have adopted a strict interpretation of the social model of disability for a long time, “which follows a strict constructivism, from which the body is pragmatically excluded” (Bernardini, 2018, p. 17). Moreover, Bernardini argues that the lack of public representation of women with disabilities and the resulting non-acknowledgement of their subjectivity lead to such exclusion.

Despite the various documents regarding disability issues over the last decades, sexual differences (Barbuto, 2006, p.18) have rarely been taken into account, whereas they are key to define the identity of the individual. As underlined by Rita Barbuto, one of the main historical representatives of DPI (Disabled Peoples’ International) Italia Onlus, “other differences and dichotomous oppositions shaping cultures are then created and organised on the basis [of sexual identity]” (*Ibid*). The adoption of an apparent *neutrality* has invested the disability world, as if it represented a unique and massive monolith lacking shades and distinctions. It contributed to ignoring the subjective existential dimensions of people with disabilities, such as those linked to body and emotions, among which the gender dimension. Such narrow interpretations have undoubtedly had a negative impact on cultural and political level and on the support to women with disabilities, who have been rarely asked about their needs and the project potentialities of their lives. Mura emphasizes that “the studies on the origins of the current representations of disability and of disabled women in Western Society [have] shown how preconceptions and stereotypes are deeply rooted in the foundations of culture and how they still tragically pervade the daily reality” (Mura, 2017, p. 202). As argued by Malaguti, there

are still many contexts in which people with disabilities are considered “subject to inequality conditions often denying access to equal opportunities of development, participation, political and social life. Having enclosed people with disabilities in only one category lead the non-disabled people to omit the dimension of disability from gender issues” (Malaguti, 2011, p. 4).

Gender issues have been taken into consideration especially thanks to the human rights-based approach, which is the core of the *Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities* not only at juridical level (as it has been already highlighted), but also on the political and cultural one. An historical isolation of women with disabilities has thus taken place through the undisputed affirmation of their feminine identity regardless of disability conditions. Barbuto argues that “the human rights-based approach is the appropriate framework addressing the condition of women and men with disabilities. Such approach uses a biopsychosocial interpretation, which comprehends the dynamic and mutual nature of the person-environment interactions and overcomes a narrow vision of mere cause-effect” (Barbuto, 2006, p.17). According to the relevant literature (Rodó-de-Zarate, 2019; Garland-Thomson, 2011, 2005; Shaw et al., 2011; Schields, 2008), the best strategy to understand the complexity of such condition is through the *intersectional approach*.

Women with disabilities are exposed to multiple hurdles due to the combination of various personal and environmental factors. Moreover, the convergence of the word-pair *gender-disability* with sexual orientation, gender expression, sexual characteristics, the status of migrant, age, religion or ethnicity, and poverty plays a role in the above mentioned hurdles (European Parliament, 2016). The above listed factors and the fact that women with disabilities are not an uniform category (gender identities are indeed similar to disability types) require an approach able to analyse and address them all. The *intersectional* approach is suitable for this kind of analysis. Intersectionality (EIGE, 2016) can be either structural or political, as argued in the study called *Discrimination Generated by the Intersection of Gender and Disability*. In the first case the inequalities experienced by people are the result of their position in society, for example the unequal access of women with disabilities to the job market compared to men in the same condition and women without disabilities (Davaki et al, 2013, p. 34). In the second case the concept refers to the interaction of inequalities stemming from the adopted political strategies, which have a different impact compared to the one they would have when acting separately or as a whole. The *intersectional* approach enables a more comprehensive outlook on human rights, empowering international discussions especially regarding connections and interactions of diverse dimensions. When the results of discriminatory policies on women with disabilities are examined

in a specific social context, any *non-intersectional* approach would seem to lead to barely reliable conclusions (Biggeri *et al.*, 2018; Barbuto, 2006).

In addition to the human rights-based and the intersectional approaches, the theoretical constructs enabling to understand the above mentioned complexity are the Quality of Life (QOL) and the Capability Approach (CA) models, as reflected also in the case-study. The first construct is of a multi-dimensional nature and is connected to the QOL model proposal introduced by Shalock and Verdugo Alonso (2002), which is the most prominent one at international level. Their model identifies eight relevant dimensions of quality of life and examines them singularly or in their interaction. Such dimensions are: social inclusion, physical well-being, interpersonal relationships, material well-being, emotional well-being, self-determination, personal development and rights (Giaconi, 2015). Even though the importance and the interdependence of all eight dimensions are undeniable, the most interesting one, in the light of the matter presented in this article, is the self-determination dimension. The perspective of an independent life as a general objective, pursued also by the “We Work” project, mainly belongs to this essential dimension of the QOL model (Jones *et al.*, 2018; Giaconi, 2015; Neely-Barnes, 2008). The social and educational perspective are the ones offering the most useful elements to examine the presented case among the numerous directions advanced by scientific literature. As Del Bianco emphasizes, such perspective indeed establishes interventions shaping the required knowledge and skills for people with disabilities to embrace behaviours of self-determination, such as “behavioural independence and self-regulation, psychological empowerment and self-realisation” (Del Bianco, 2018, p.32). Skills development is the *core* of the self-determination processes, without forgetting the significance of choices and/or of achieved results (Ward, 2005). The complexity and importance of self-determination domain seems to evolve in two fundamental dimensions, as also reflected in the case-study. One dimension is of political and collective nature and is connected to the human rights sphere (Blank & Martinis, 2015). The second dimension, on the other hand, is of an individual nature concerning the motivation and the intrinsic traits of a person (Frielink *et al.*, 2018; Niemic *et al.*, 2017)

It is only by providing people with disabilities with the opportunities enabling them to choose and build their life project, both at an individual and a social level, that the QOL domains will positively develop. Similarly, the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1999) envisages the opportunity to choose as one of the fundamental human rights, while shifting the focus from the specifics of the disability condition to the creation of equal conditions in terms of opportunity and choice (Trani, Bakhshi, Bellanca *et al.*, 2011). It can be adopted as an effective gauge to identify the well-being dimensions, together with their bonds/barriers and their resources/community support. In this

perspective, education, training and, employment seem to be strategic opportunities to foster the development of the individual and of the belonging group living in vulnerable conditions. However, education and employment translate into actual opportunities only if the specific nature of their target group, which is women with disabilities in this case, is taken into account.

*Disability and gender perspectives: methodological prerequisites*

Social and employment inclusion of women with disabilities is attainable at methodological level through empowerment processes, which are able to trigger personal skills taking into account limits and unexpressed potential, as reflected also in the case-study. Moreover, the empowerment process implies taking on responsibilities, facing difficulties and playing a pivotal role in defining a quality of life project.

Rita Barbuto, one of the advisers with disabilities involved in coaching activities on the rights of Palestinian women with disabilities, argues that the empowerment process enables people with disabilities to become stronger. Their capability seems to develop starting from what they can really do in their personal, social and cultural context of life, as ratified by Article 6 of the CRPD. Such approach is a journey of growth which involves various existential dimensions: the emotional, perceptual, intellectual, behavioural, enabling and re-enabling dimensions. Thanks to such journey, behaviours are transformed through the adoption of new approaches (Barbuto, 2018; 2003). Such process develops in everyday life and it increases awareness, thanks to the organisations of people with disabilities, of situations which might or might not unlock development potential. Lastly, empowerment can be placed in a political and emancipating perspective triggering a participatory behaviour, which contributes to changing the society perception of people with disabilities.

One of the most effective empowerment methods is *peer counselling*<sup>7</sup> involving organisations of people with disabilities. It consists in a helping relationship between “equals”, meaning between people in the same situation, designed both for individuals and groups. In the case herein analysed, the women participating have both gender and disability conditions in common. The difference between the role of the “adviser” and the one of the “advice-seeker” lies in the degree of awareness regarding the condition of disability achieved by the former compared to the latter. The objective is fostering and

<sup>7</sup> “Peer counselling is scientifically rooted in Humanistic Psychology, particularly in the theories of Carl R. Rogers and Robert Carkhuff. Its operational procedures stem from the socio-political experience of emancipation movements, developed by extremely underprivileged individuals” (Barbuto, 2018, p.65).



stimulating processes of empowerment in the individual and in the group, raising awareness about their potential to have a more independent and stress-free life. The fact that both roles share the same condition of disability triggers the “mirroring” phenomenon, a phenomenon of such a deep identification that it is able to prompt individual and group motivation and to embrace the peer-counselling experience.

### **The case-study**

The “We Work” project, which is the focus of the case-study, establishes three lines of action for women with disabilities. The educational line provides capacity-building activities, which apply a participatory approach through peer counselling. The employment line aims at providing internship opportunities and technical assistance supporting the development of small-sized enterprises founded by women with disabilities, thanks to previous projects implemented by EducAid.<sup>8</sup> The last line is an intervention aiming at raising awareness regarding social and employment inclusion of women with disabilities and of people affected by transversal disabilities, designed for businesses, schools and social services. On one hand the educational and employment lines seem to portray women with disabilities as penalised. However, on the other hand, these are strategic experiences to raise one's personal self-esteem by unlocking the potential and the skills required to create an independent life.

#### *The socio-economic context of the project*

The “We Work” project has been carried out between 2016 and 2018 in Gaza Strip, where women with disabilities are often living in extremely difficult and discriminating conditions. Here discrimination stems from being a woman in a male-ruled society rooted in patriarchal principles (Obeid, 2016) and from the condition of disability in an environment with multiple socio-cultural and architectural barriers. As advanced by the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), women are marginalised and excluded from the labour market. As a matter of fact, only 17% of them works against 69% of men. According to the *Needs Assessment “Violence exposure in Palestine: the most*

<sup>8</sup> The “We Work” project is aligned with other interventions from EducAid: “INCLUDE-Socio-economic empowerment of women with disabilities in Gaza Strip” (EU, 2015), “Empowerment of DPOs promoting WWDs rights in the West Bank” (EU, 2014), “We work. Socio-economic inclusion of women with disabilities in Gaza Strip” (RER, 2016).

*vulnerable groups at high risk*” (Cospe, EducAid & PWWSD, 2018), a study carried out in 2014 shows that more than a third of interviewed women declared that violence potentially occurs mostly in domestic and community environments. Moreover, the unceasing Israeli-Palestinian conflict contributed to creating such vulnerable conditions that violence levels worsened. The violence episodes rate indeed increased by 22% for married women during the conflict. Such percentage reached 30% for single women after the conflict (Müller and Tranchant, 2017). Palestinian authorities developed the *National Strategy for Combating Violence Against Women (2011-2019)* in an attempt to solve such issue.

Although the local normative framework still shows serious gaps in the protection of people with disabilities rights, the ratification of the CRPD (UN, 2006) by the Palestinian authorities is definitely a positive sign. The Convention adoption entails a commitment aimed at pursuing innovative political and cultural orientations, as reflected in the *The National Strategic Plan of the Disability Sector in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (Birzeit University, 2012). Such orientations are mainly about the promotion of a disability model based on human rights and on the development of an effective strategy for social inclusion. The lack of employment opportunities is, unfortunately, the cause of social exclusion episodes, which, as a matter of fact, reinforce the dependence of women with disabilities on their families<sup>9</sup>. Infrastructure accessibility issues represent inclusion barriers which are to be added up to the cultural ones. Indeed, the widespread preconceived perception of Palestinian public opinion viewing women with disabilities as unsuitable to work is one of the cultural barriers preventing these from entering the labour market, as reflected in an interesting study with the title *Emancipatory Disability Research EDR*<sup>10</sup> (2014). Employment would enable an emancipatory process, through which restoring the self-esteem that has been hurt in many discriminating situations is possible. Such situations shed light on the lack of professional skills, which is brought about by the recurring and premature exclusion of women with disabilities from the educational system. The assessment carried out at the beginning of the project (Cospe, EducAid & PWWSD, 2018) stresses the need to develop services, such as help desks to foster the supply and demand of work for women and people with disabilities. It is a very strenuous challenge considering that the difficulties in finding

<sup>9</sup> Palestinian Authorities have recently adopted the following measures regarding disability: *The National Strategic Plan for the Disability Sector*, the *Inclusive Education Policy* included in the *Education Development Strategic Plan* (EDSP) 2014-2019), the *National Health Strategy 2014-2016*, and the *National Strategy for Employment* (2014-2016).

<sup>10</sup> The project in which the study was carried out is: “Include, socio-economic empowerment of women with disabilities in Gaza Strip” funded by the European Commission.

employment are shared by the whole population of Gaza Strip. The ten-year long border closure and the relevant socio-political isolation of the area are the source of the gradual economic impoverishment of the population living mainly on international humanitarian aid support.

*Project results analysis based on the Quality of Life construct*

In the following paragraph a transversal analysis through the paradigm of Quality of Life and of the main project activities and results will be advanced. The gathered information has been processed according to interviews and focus groups taking place during the project and according to the following documents: the assessment study, the project proposal, the monitoring reports, the final evaluation, the products created through project activities<sup>11</sup>. The key constituents of the analysis model herein used are the domains (paragraph 2.3), which are inflected in the respective indicators<sup>12</sup> and descriptors<sup>13</sup>, as suggested in the chart below. Indicators and descriptors have been used as categories for the organisation and quality analysis of the key information in the context of life of the involved women. The overall objective of the project is “the promotion of women with disabilities inclusion in Gaza Strip, complying with The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, which has deliberately triggered socio-economic empowerment of women with disabilities, thanks to the support in entering the labour market provided to unemployed women with disabilities through various activities, among which the skills assessment. Moreover, it supported women with disabilities, leaders of small-sized enterprises, in improving their professional skills. Lastly, it raised awareness on women rights, especially on labour law, in local communities. The adopted methodological approach was based on empowerment through specific peer counselling interventions. Such approach

<sup>11</sup> The following studies were carried out during the project: *Pre-Assessment Report. Small Enterprises lead by Women with Disabilities* (SEC, 2017); *Assessment of micro-enterprises managed by women with disabilities in Gaza Strip* (ARCO-PIN, 2017); *End of Consultancy Report. Provision of coaching for SMEs Led by Women with Disabilities* (SEC, 2018). The presented paragraph was inspired by information provided by two EducAid collaborators involved in the project implementation: Francesca Manzoni (on February 2nd, 2019) and Francesca Annetti (on March 4, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> According to Shalock and Verdugo Alonso, indicators enable the implementation of domains, “portraying the single dimensions of Quality of Life, namely the specific conditions to be considered in each domain” (Giaconi, 2015, p.22).

<sup>13</sup> Descriptors contribute to inflect indicators in specific contexts of life, it is a range of “observable behaviours and situations which are significant to their pertinent context” (Giaconi, 2015, p.23).

has been considered key to the results achieved, as is deducible from the content of “Descriptors related to context” in the chart below.

Tab.1 - Project analysis chart based on Quality of Life

<b>QOL Domains</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Descriptors related to context</b>
Emotional well-being	(E.g. Satisfaction, self-concept, security, spirituality, happiness).	Women with disabilities participating in the project, especially those who carried out an internship, declare that their self-esteem levels have increased and they have been able to be confident in their skills.
Interpersonal relationships	(E.g. Family relationships, friendships, work and social relationships, intimacy).	Women with disabilities who carried out an internship state that they have gained social skills. Their role in the family has changed and has acquired more responsibilities.
Material well-being	(E.g. Assets, properties, financial situation, accommodation, security).	Women with disabilities who carried out paid educational internships and the entrepreneurs have been able to improve their economic conditions and those of their families.
Personal development	(E.g. Personal enrichment, abilities, social skills, fulfilment).	Women with disabilities participating in the coaching on empowerment have started to change their own self-perception. Women with disabilities have participated in specific coaching on job-hunting and working in private and no profit companies. Several women with disabilities carried out paid professional internships. A number of them have participated in advanced educational courses regarding social media, strengthening their communication skills. 93% of women with disabilities participating in help desk trainings have noticed an improvement in their skills. Other women have received technical assistance from local experts to strengthen their small-sized enterprises development.
Physical well-being	(Nutrition, personal hygiene, health, medical assistance, leisure time)	Not detected.
Self-determination	(E.g. Personal opinions and preferences, decisions, personal control).	Women with disabilities were able to access Help Desk services, which assisted them in making decisions in their educational and professional life. 77% of the Help Desk recipients participating in the evaluation process state that they have chosen to

		continue studying after having consulted the Held Desk. Women with disabilities, who carried out an internship, state that they have gained higher levels of independence. Increase in skills of women with disabilities to independently make decisions in their small-sized enterprises without their family interfering.
Social inclusion	(E.g. <i>Community inclusion and engagement, role, support, acceptance</i> ).	Educational and internship activities have enabled social inclusion processes of the participating women with disabilities. 57% of those participating in the evaluation state that they have not encountered barriers to access the HD.
Rights	(E.g. <i>Rights awareness, protection, privacy, confidentiality, respect</i> ).	Women with disabilities participating in peer counselling activities and coaching on the rights of people with disabilities and on CRPD gained fundamental knowledge for their rights awareness.

Source: adapted from Shalock and Verdugo Alonso, 2006, in Giaconi, 2015

At first glance, the chart sheds light on the interconnection between the diverse domains. Indeed the abundance of descriptors simultaneously relating to multiple areas underlines the multi-dimensional logic behind the QOL model. Such a model assists in looking at the lives of people with disabilities through a global and ecological lens able to identify flaws and potential not only of the individuals involved, but also of their contexts of life. The observations herein presented aim at highlighting the above mentioned level of interconnection.

The professional experience has been tremendously important for the personal development of the women involved, especially in connection with the *self-determination domain*. Moreover, it contributed to combat a discriminatory culture against women with disabilities based on stereotypical social representations. The examined results show indeed that both women having started their small-sized enterprises, thanks to the project technical assistance, and those having carried out a paid professional internship state that being hired in their new professional role contributed to gradually change the image their relatives had of them. More specifically, women with disabilities carrying out internships had the opportunity not only to financially help their families (*material well-being domain*), but also to access a new social context. Processes of empowerment are, thus, triggered by the latter through the promotion of social inclusion processes opening to new professional and social relationships (*social inclusion and interpersonal relationships domain*). Such result is particularly relevant in Gaza Strip, where the family context is

sometimes the main social space of women with disabilities. It is the space where they shape the first representation of themselves, co-build the motivational drive to face social inclusion challenges outside of it and establish interpersonal relationships according to their personal development. The process of emancipation from the family can be particularly difficult for women with disabilities due to different reasons, among which gender. As argued by Emilia Napolitano indeed “*a woman with disability struggles to be acknowledged by their relatives as a woman. The family very often hardly accepts that their daughter could spread her wings and “fly away”, yet, it promptly overprotects her from situations considered dangerous for her safety*” (Napolitano, 2003, p. 33). In the specific case of women with disabilities leading small-sized enterprises, the ability to take decisions by gaining a higher level of independence contributed to gradually reduce the dependence from their family allowing the exercise of the self-determination right (*self-determination domain*) in the perspective of empowerment. Such right is rooted on the real achievement of freedom of choice and freedom to build one’s own life project. Self-determined behaviour shows indeed how critical is the role played by the opportunity to choose, “as a fundamental condition for quality of life, or as Sen would say, for the *well being*” (Cottini, 2016, p.15).

The internship experience was often the first encounter for women with disabilities with the world of employment and vice versa. An encounter which was key to question the widespread stereotypes about “working women with disabilities”, as the monitoring activity data shows. The development of such awareness was observable especially in the context where the internship was integrated by a coaching activity on the rights of people with disabilities. Such activities were designed for disabled people and for the various targets of population (students, entrepreneurs, civil society representatives) according to the *twin-track approach*<sup>14</sup> adopted by the Italian Cooperation Guidelines (MAECI & AICS, 2018) to promote disability as a topic of transversal responsibility and interest and not exclusively of the individuals concerned. The professional experience has generally contributed to raise the levels of the participants' self-esteem and personal motivation to overcome the barriers to professional integration (*domain of emotional well-being*). Thanks to the empowerment process triggered by the methodological approach of the project (paragraph 2.2), the women involved have gradually become aware of being able to claim the rights of both women and

<sup>14</sup> “The twin-track approach suggests the increase of efforts, on one hand, to foster mainstreaming disability policies through cooperation initiatives, on the other hand, to implement initiatives explicitly designed for people with disabilities taking their specific needs into account” (MAECI & AICS, 2018 p.19).

people with disabilities (*personal development domain*). They have realised that they were among the main “activists” in the process of deconstruction of social stigmas and stereotypes concerning people with disabilities and their supposed and generalised tendency to victimhood.

As far as the analysed project is concerned, the engagement of Italian advisers, men and women with disabilities,<sup>15</sup> in leading peer-counselling activities has been a very significant proof in favour of the process of empowerment. Such proof triggered a genuine hope of being able to gain new skills, to make changes and face challenges in the recipients, according to an emancipation process based on trust.

### **Final observations and perspectives**

The hereby presented case-study refers to a context of extreme complexity and it is, therefore, particularly demanding. It is problematic and, at the same time, inspiring to identify successful points and potentials for a hypothetical “transferrable” intervention to different situations. The mainly observed issue concerns the context itself, which, due to its socio-political configuration, places a series of obstacles to development programs due to the continuous conflicts and, therefore, to the humanitarian emergency. A second obstacle is the target group composition: the women involved in the project are affected by a physical disability and have received a medium-high education. These two conditions generally guarantee more opportunities to find employment compared to those affected by cognitive disabilities and coming from extremely underprivileged cultural contexts. The way such a successful intervention as the proposed one could be adapted to a more heterogeneous target group could be an interesting reflection.

As far as the strengths and potentials are concerned, the universal nature of some activities which, despite being designed for women with disabilities, have grasped the needs of a wider portion of population with and without disabilities, is to be appraised. The Help Desk (HD) is a fitting example. Not only women with disabilities, but also women in general have opted for its assistance in the professional field, proving that acknowledging people with disabilities rights extends to respecting the rights of all. The Help Desk, which was placed in a space of great public visibility (the Chamber of Commerce), raised special interest, but also some doubts about its purpose: an employment placement service for women with disabilities, as if unemployment did not impact the

<sup>15</sup> The advisers leading the educational activities are part of the Italian Network for Disability and Development (RIDS - Rete Italiana Disabilità e Sviluppo).

population as a whole. Not wishing to deny the latter, the Help Desk takes on one of the main project's challenges: raising awareness on the need of the existing opportunities to comply with *skills* parameters according to employment offer trends, though taking underprivileged groups into consideration.

Starting from the case herein analysed, the *skills perspective* is extremely suitable to combat a welfare culture which should support self-determination of people with disabilities, but, as a matter of fact, contributes to make them passive and not owners of their life project. The thread of the article's theoretical and practical observations inevitably triggers a reflection on the quality of social planning process and, more extensively, welfare. What kind of approach should be adopted to develop an inclusive society? It is a question which would require a very comprehensive answer, the following lines are an attempt to advance only some insights for further reflection.

First of all, the idea of development behind an inclusive society lays its foundations on differences and not “despite” them, thus avoiding a model inspired by homogenisation and obsessed by the myth of “normality” (Focault, 1999). The achievable perspective can not rest on welfare principles but, on the contrary, should rest on solutions, jointly established by people with disabilities, protecting their dignity, defending their rights and extending the responsibility of universal rights claim to the whole population. Such perspective aims at relinquishing a social protection-based welfare and adopts the social inclusion paradigm promoting the empowerment of people with disabilities (Griffo, 2018). This kind of direction implies an intervention not only in the field of social and health care but also of employment, education, environment through an *intersectional approach* paragraph 2.1 able to include numerous individual and social variables related to disability, as well as gender. The planning and social intervention perspective herein advanced is of a participatory and inter-sectoral nature and is able to recognise the various roles played by stakeholders in building people with disabilities life projects, especially women's. As already mentioned, family is certainly a pivotal stakeholder, which should be supported and empowered for it not to risk being excessively protective, if not oppressive, particularly towards women.

Lastly, the independence perspective of women with disabilities cannot be conceived without a journey of social and professional inclusion. Such journey requires a strong awareness of equal opportunities rights in the professional field, which, on one hand, implies the empowerment process of women themselves and, on the other hand, the ability of enterprises, public and private services to question social stereotypical representations and to open the world of employment to innovative and inclusive experiences. A consciousness and capacity building journey, involving Public Education, can enable such



awareness leading to professional experiences including women with disabilities, who have so far been underprivileged compared to men. The internship experience of the case-study is another fitting example, as it managed to trigger changes of social representations and relationships in professional or family contexts, being an important step towards women with disabilities empowerment through processes of social and professional inclusion.

## References

- Adams R., Reiss B., Serlin D. (2015). *Keywords for Disabilities Studies*. New York: New York University Press.
- AICS, MAECI (2018). *Linee guida per la disabilità e l'inclusione sociale negli interventi di cooperazione internazionale*. Roma.
- Barbuto R. (2006). Genere e disabilità da una prospettiva etica. In Galati M. & Barbuto R., *Donne, disabilità e salute. Questioni etiche, strategie e strumenti di tutela nelle politiche per la salute e le pari opportunità*. Lamezia Terme: Comunità Edizioni, pp.17-34.
- Barbuto R. (2018). L'empowerment per l'inclusione delle persone con disabilità. In Griffo G. (a cura di), *Il nuovo welfare coerente con i principi della CRPD*. Lamezia Terme: Comunità Edizioni, pp.45-74.
- Bernardini M.G. (2018). Corpi Muti. Per una critica alla prevalente irrepresentabilità del soggetto-donna disabile nel pensiero femminista. In D'Errico L. & Straniero A. M., *Il visibile e l'invisibile. Studi sull'esponibilità dei corpi femminili*. Roma: Aracne Editrice, pp. 11-26.
- Biggeri M., Ferrarini A. & Mauro V. (2018). *Analisi del benessere e della povertà multidimensionale nello sviluppo umano sostenibile*. Pisa: Pacini Editore.
- Blanck P., & Martinis J. G., (2015). The right to make choices: The National Resource Center for supported decision-making. In *Inclusion*, 3, pp. 24-33.
- Braddock D. & Parish S. (2001). An Institutional History of Disability. In Albrecht G. L., K., Seelman K.D. & Bury M., *Handbook of Disability Studies*. Sage Publications, pp.11-68.
- Canevaro A., Goussot A. (2000). *La difficile storia degli handicappati in Italia*. Roma: Carocci.
- Cottini L. (2016). *L'autodeterminazione nelle persone con disabilità. Percorsi educativi per svilupparla*. Trento: Erickson.
- Crespi I. (2006). *Sesso, genere, identità: il contributo dei gender studies*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Davaki K., Marzo C., Narminio E & Arvanitidou N. (2013). *Discrimination generated by the Intersection of Gender and Disability*. Brussels: European Parliament.
- De Laurentis T. (1986). *Feminist studies/Critical studies*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

- Del Bianco N. (2018). L'autodeterminazione nelle persone con disabilità intellettive: principi e procedure di valutazione. In Giaconi C. & Del Bianco N., *Inclusione 3.0*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, pp.113-137.
- EIGE (2016). *Poverty, gender and intersecting inequalities in the EU, Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Foucault M. (1999). *Gli anormali. Corso al Collège de France (1974-1975)*. Milano: Feltrinelli (Terza ed., 2017).
- Galati M., Barbuto R., Coppedè N., Meduri M., Napolitano E. (2003). *Una possibile autonomia: itinerari di donne con disabilità tra empowerment e advocacy*. Catanzaro: Rubbettino Editore.
- Garland-Thomson R. (2002). Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory. *NWSA Journal*, 14: 1-32.
- Garland-Thomson R. (2005). Feminist Disability Studies. *Signs Journal*, 30(2): 1557-1587. Doi: 10.1086/423352.
- Garland-Thomson R. (2011). Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concepts. *Hypatia Journal*, 26(3): 591-609. Doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x.
- Giaconi C. (2015). *Qualità della vita e adulti con disabilità. Percorsi di ricerca e prospettive inclusive*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Griffo G. (ed.) (2018). *Il nuovo welfare coerente con i principi della CRPD. L'empowerment e l'inclusione delle persone con disabilità*. Lamezia Terme: Comunità Edizioni.
- Hall K.Q. (ed.) (2014). *Feminist Disabilities Studies*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Jones J. L., Shogren K. A., Grandfield E. M., Vierling K. L., Gallus K. L., Shaw L. A., (2018). Examining Predictors of Self-Determination in Adults with 50 Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 30(5): 601-614.
- Lancioni S. (2017). Prefazione all'edizione italiana. In European Disability Forum (2011), *Secondo Manifesto sui Diritti delle Donne e delle Ragazze con Disabilità nell'Unione Europea*. Pisa: Informare un'h.
- Lykke N. (2010). *Feminist studies. A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and writing*. New York: Routledge.
- Malaguti E. (2011). Donne e uomini con disabilità. Studi di genere, disability studies e nuovi intrecci. *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica*, 6(1). DOI: 10.6092/issn.1970-2221/2238.
- Medeghini R., D'Alessio S., Marra A., Vadalà G., Valtellina E. (2013). *Disability Studies. Emancipazione, inclusione scolastica e sociale, cittadinanza*. Trento: Erickson.
- Morris J. (1989). *Pride against Prejudice. A Personal Politics of Disability*. London: The Women's press.
- Müller C. & Tranchant J-P. (2017). *Tackling violence against women and girls in Gaza*. Disponibile in: <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/10839IIED.pdf>.
- Mura A. & Tatulli I. (2017). Emancipazione e voci femminili. Il progetto di vita tra difficoltà e opportunità. *Italian Journal of special Education and Inclusion*, 5(1). <https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/sipes/article/view/2328>.

- Napolitano E. (2003). Famiglia, relazioni e percorsi di empowerment. In Galati M., Barbuto R., Coppedè N., Meduri M., Napolitano E. *Una possibile autonomia. Itinerari di donne con disabilità tra empowerment e advocacy*. Catanzaro: Rubbettino Editore.
- Neely-Barnes S., Marcenko M. & Weber L. (2008). Does Choice Influence Quality of Life for People With Mild Intellectual Disabilities?. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 46(1): 12-26.
- Niemiec R. M., Shogren K. A. & Wehmeyer M. L., (2017). Character Strengths and Intellectual and Developmental Disability: A Strengths-Based Approach from Positive Psychology. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 52(1): 13-25.
- Nussbaum M.C. (2006). *Le nuove frontiere della giustizia. Disabilità, nazionalità appartenenza di specie*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Oliver M. (1990). *Politics of Disablement*. London: Macmillan.
- Oliver M. (1996). *Understanding disability. From theory to practice*. New York-Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- RIDS (ed.) (2015). *Disabilità & Sviluppo. Come includere le persone con disabilità nella cooperazione allo sviluppo*. Rimini: GuaraldiLab.
- Rodó-de-Zarate M. (2019). Intersectionality. In *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies*. Doi: 10.1002/9781118568446.eurs0164.
- Schalock R.L. & Verdugo Alonso M.A. (2002). *Handbook of quality of life for human service practitioners*. Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.
- Shaw L.R., Chan F., McMahon B.T. (2011). Intersectionality and disability Harassment: The Interactive Effects of Disability. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 55(2): 82-91. Doi: 10.1177/0034355211431167.
- Shields S.A. (2008). Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective. *Sex Roles Journal*, 59(5-6): 301-311. Doi: 10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8.
- Sen A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen A. (2006). *Scelta, benessere, equità*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Taddei A. (2017). *Contro la violenza di genere: tra formazione ed intervento. Riflessioni da una ricerca nella repubblica di San Marino*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, pp. 21-36.
- Trani J-F., Bakhshi P., Bellanca N., Biggeri M., Marchetta F. (2011). Disabilities through the Capability Approach lens: Implications for public policies. *ALTER, European Journal of Disability research*, 5, 143-157.
- United Nations (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability*. UN, New York.
- United Nations (2018). *Realization of Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disability. United Nations 2018 flagship report on disability and development*. New York: ONU.
- Watson N., Roulstone A., Thomas C. (2012). *Handbook of Disabilities Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Wendell S. (1989). Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability. *Hipatia*, IV(2).