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The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations as Reflected in the Social Movement of the Disabled in Iran: Achievements and Obstacles

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The disabled people of Iran, past and present

The history of the disabled in Iran is quite similar to that of any other country. Initially they were observed as flaws in the system of creation, always in need of assistance and care, the responsibility of which would naturally fall on their parents who had no choice but to provide the means necessary to relieve their primary needs. At this stage the disabled did not socialize or were not able to do so. The second stage of development in the social life of the disabled was through religious and charity foundations, which enabled these individuals to leave their homes and acquire some primary education by clergy men and charitable people. The presence of the disabled in community centers, mostly in small areas and villages to learn the Qur'an and memorize the Shahnameh (an epic poetic masterpiece written by Ferdowsi), was the result of this new-found social freedom.

In the third stage of social development, the disabled were empowered by society, supported and sponsored by charities and allowed to acquire preliminary educational abilities and crafts. In the fourth stage, which spans the past 40 to 50 years, the very first modern non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the country were formed. These organizations recognized the rights of the disabled to learn crafts and skills, earn a living, and have a respectable life in accordance with social norms, and placed these rights within their working charters. The main feature of such organizations was that they were managed by wealthy charitable people or specialists in aiding the disabled, while the disabled themselves had no part in the matter. The fifth stage of social development was the origination of the very first self-help organizations for the disabled, formed through the many endeavors of the first group of educated disabled people in the 1960s. However, it was only since the 1970s that this movement has taken on more permanent forms through organizations such as the Disabled Society of Iran (DSI).

Even in this period, despite the sudden growth of government assets through oil production, the social interaction of the disabled was limited to their participation in newly established special schools for the disabled and governmental rehabilitation centers. There was no visible ground for the development and expansion of NGOs for the disabled (DNGOs). It was not until the 1980s and the increasing presence of educated people with disabilities in society that the circumstances existed, including general and cultural awareness, to establish DNGOs which would be managed by disabled for the disabled. Following this were steady improvements in such organizations, including the White Cane Foundation in 1990 and the Blind Society of Iran in 1995. In the second half of the 20th century there was

a considerable boost in the establishment of NGOs, consisting of disabled activists, to the point that over the period of five years the number of such organizations reached 250, albeit only in smaller areas, rural areas, and provinces. The establishment of such organizations has had a significant effect on the quality of activities and services of the disabled in Iran, some of which will be discussed below.

Achievements

The most important and direct influences of NGOs on the morale and living conditions of the disabled are outlined below.

1. **Shaping the group identity of the disabled.** Establishment of such NGOs has resulted in the formation of a group identity of sorts among the disabled as people with common rights and needs; this is the first base for the rise of conscious social efforts of the disabled as a recognized social minority.
2. **Increasing self-esteem and confidence.** Through these NGOs, the disabled have come to a common belief they can change their destinies and improve their own lives and social affairs by willingness to do so.
3. **Enabling the public and social presence of the disabled.** DNGOs have empowered more disabled people to have reasons to leave their homes and to be present in the public. This is especially true for women who, due to cultural and tradition limitations, had no social presence before.
4. **Filling voids in the governmental service system.** One of the most prominent achievements of the disabled self-help organizations in Iran was the improvements in services that government-supported organizations either did not provide or provided with sub-par quality and quantity, such as teaching Braille and navigation skills to the blind, providing wheelchairs and other means for facilitated accessibility to individuals with physical disabilities and movement impairments, teaching arts and crafts to the mentally disabled and etc.
5. **Voicing the needs of the target group to the decision-makers.** One of the significant accomplishments of the DNGOs was their role in enabling the needs of the disabled to become clear to the executive and decisive authorities or bureaus such as the Islamic parliamentary council.
6. **Offering specialized consultation to the ministries and public sectors.** Another vital achievement of the DNGOs was offering consultation for fulfilling the needs of the disabled and improving the management of their affairs such as prioritizing accessibility in urban environments and assigning budgets to institutions for the social welfare of the disabled.
7. **Raising public awareness.** The DNGOs educated the public through different methods such as the media to recognize the needs of the disabled and introducing the social rights of these people.

Following on the above-mentioned achievements, this essay next explains the social and legal rights of the disabled as established within the DNGOs.

- **Ratification of the comprehensive law on the rights of the disabled in Iran.** Through the efforts of the activists and the support of the NGOs, the comprehensive law on the rights of the disabled was presented to the parliament and after being reviewed by a committee of five disabled rights activists, it was completed and ratified as the most important document to defend the legal rights of the disabled in Iran since 2004 and the most important reference for disabled rights in Iran.
- **Ratification of the Convention for the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) in Iran.** After the acceptance of the convention by the United Nations, the translation and publication of this great global achievement of the disabled was placed on the agenda of DNGOs in Iran. Efforts in convincing the legislature to sign and accede to this convention led to its ratification in the parliament in 2008; ratification of international treaties in the parliament of Iran is equal to their addition to the legal constitution of the country.
- **Establishing a committee for the accessibility of the city of Tehran.** The second amendment in the comprehensive law by the NGOs led to the establishment of the committee for the accessibility of Tehran, a division of the current municipality, with representatives from the DNGOs to supervise and execute the accessibility plans for Tehran.

Obstacles

In the first section, this essay reviewed the stages of social life development of the disabled citizens and the emergence of NGOs, which were similar to that which occurs in many other countries. In this section, it will look at the significant obstacles in the process of developing DNGOs. It takes a general look at the internal flaws in the main functions of these organizations, as well as observe a number of external limitations in the cooperation of the NGOs with administrative and executive sectors and governmental institutions. These obstacles are only general observations and do not necessarily apply to all DNGOs.

1. **Insufficient professional human resources.** Even though the establishment of self-help organizations by activists represents an improvement in the social functioning of the disabled, the intention to establish such an organization, and the actual managing and optimal administration of one are very different issues. Many managers of public liability institutions do not have the management know-how and skill to run the facility and this reduces the quality of the services they provide.
2. **Lack of professional structure.** Many of the organizations for the disabled in Iran lack professionalism in both structure and services. Since their executive qualities are solely dependant on the management skills rather than academic

and professional criteria, the quality of their services, if at all acceptable, cannot be long-lasting.

3. **Lack of financial stability.** Many of the self-made organizations for the disabled lack stable funding options, therefore their service qualities suffer a variance and more importantly the lack of fiscal material leads to the loss of professional resources.
4. **Lack of democratic succession of management.** Many NGOs suffer the lack of democracy in both electing and transferring management positions and the board of directors. There is no guarantee that management will be transferred to reliable, dependable and worthy candidates. This issue has caused many disabled rights activists to forfeit their positions within DNGOs.
5. **Lack of clear executive procedures, and methods for evaluation and inspection.** The lack of a solid evaluation and inspection procedure for the activists in DNGOs, insufficient supervision and reports and unclear executive and financial plans have caused some ethical management issues where certain NGOs were literally turned into money-making machines. These cases not only waste monetary resources designated for the improvement of the lives of the disabled but also damage the unity of other DNGOs that strive to serve and hinder the legal support of the rights these NGOs aim to uphold.
6. **Dependence of most institutions on government budgets.** The focus on oil production resources within the government has caused institutions to seek budgets from state authorities rather than utilizing the skills they have to leverage earning potentials within the government. This dependence not only lowers the level of professionalism but also causes the next important issue.
7. **The anomalous control of the government over DNGOs.** The monetary dependence of DNGOs on the government enables the government to control the activities of the institutions which can eventually only damage the individual claims to the legal rights of the disabled.
8. **Lack of national linking channels.** Despite the soaring increase in the number of DNGOs and even improvement of executive and management qualities, organizations in Iran are not nationally connected to each other. This reduces their chances of effective action and staking claims as a national unit with governmental authorities.

Conclusion

This article highlights the general achievements of DNGOs and obstacles that alter their activities. However, a comprehensive overview shows the social movement of the disabled in Iran and DNGOs has admittedly had a significant growth, especially over the past two decades. The tangible result of that has been the increasing prevalence of the belief among the disabled of Iran that they must unite to claim their rights in an organized body. There are two factors that encourage the development of DNGOs. First is the inability of the

government to fulfill the needs of the disabled which leads them to seek aid and support from NGOs. Second is the increasing presence of the educated disabled and professionals in matters pertaining to disability in positions of management, office, and social activities within the DNGOs, who greatly contribute to dealing with issues and pathologies of such organizations.