

Arts and Disability in Occupied Palestinian Territories

Literature and Practice Review – Summary

March 2021

Background

The Disability Under Siege project seeks to examine what are the opportunities and barriers to promoting discussion of culture, disability, and inclusive education in Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). And how can such discussions be developed through collaborative partnerships between cultural partners and disability-led organisations?

This review undertaken from December 2020 to February 2021 mapped and reviewed available literature and cultural practices relating to arts and disability in Occupied Palestinian Territories. This report provides a summary of available literature and practice to help the project engage the following key questions

- How do contemporary cultural practices engage with disability?
- How do disability organisations engage with contemporary cultural practices?
- What can these models of engagement tell us about the priorities of each institution?
- Are there productive ways of engaging the institutional structures of cultural practices to reflect upon the issue of inclusion and disability education?
- How can discourses and social practices related to disability reflect upon political concerns about marginalisation within cultural practices, including issues around identity, ideology, the body, and social injustice?

All arts practices identified as a result of this study have been mapped to a database which can [be viewed here](#)¹ The full Literature and Practice Review of Arts and Disability in Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Jordan can be found at <https://disabilityundersiege.org/current-research/>.

Summary

The Palestinian art and cultural scene is beset by multiple local and international concerns. The prevailing social, political, and economic volatility has created significant instability within the arts sector that impacts upon cultural production, visual representation, and cultural infrastructure alike. Palestinian art and culture have historically contributed to the representation politics of archiving and the continued pursuit of change in the future. To date, however, there has been sporadic engagement with the issue of disability. The issue of disability has not thus far been a critical issue that cultural organizations and art practitioners engage.

Nonetheless, the number of artistic and cultural practices and projects relating to disability seems to be growing in Palestine. Several cultural partnerships with disability-led organizations are already in place. Research-led practice in the arts has been also increasing in the past few years, encouraging interdisciplinary within the arts in other sectors, and further activating the role of art in social- and community-based forms of exchange. In addition, several art and

¹ If you would like to contribute further evidence of literature and practice related to disability in Jordan please contact disabilityundersiege@bham.ac.uk

cultural institutions are paying more attention to their physical spaces, and facilities to become more inclusive and accessible.

The **relative lack of academic resources, absence of evaluation mechanisms, and the insufficiency of unified policies**, while troubling given the concerns and issues around disability and the rights of persons with disabilities, can be also understood as an opportunity for disability-led and cultural organisations to develop projects that address their own priorities in relation to inclusivity and education.

The **use of art as a means of therapy could create opportunities for further engagement and collaborations between art and cultural practices and disability-led organizations**. Therefore, opportunities involve the development of both practical elements and theoretical discourses on disability. This would encourage the development of existing interdisciplinary collaborations, encouraging research-led practices in the art sphere to further activate the multi-sector role of art in social and community transformations.

There is a **need for further coordination between literature and practice in the arts, cultural organizations and civil society**. In partnership with arts and cultural organisations, disability-led organizations could develop their expertise and knowledge on the needs of persons with disabilities and, in turn, produce vital projects and initiatives in the field of measuring the impact of arts education in relation to disability.

Supporting **research-based practices and collaborative initiatives would encourage engagement with the arts in the lives of persons with disabilities** and would support the development of a cultural infrastructure that is capable of engaging more fully with disability.

Areas for Discussion

While our research maps the relationship between art practices and disability-led practices in the cultural sphere, there are further areas of research that need to be expanded upon to give a fuller sense of the potential to be had in supporting cultural organisations and disability-led organisations in the development of projects.

A number of key questions emerged throughout this research, one related to the opportunities and barriers to promoting inclusive education through collaborative partnerships between cultural partners and disability-led organisations; the other was concerned with how disability studies could affect an alternative methodology for cultural practices to further engage with the politics of representing forms of exclusion? In light of these questions, three further areas of research need to be expanded upon:

- Disability Studies and Arts Education
- Disability, the Arts, and Digital Methodologies
- Art Activism and Disability in The Middle East

In effecting collaborations between cultural activities and disability organisations we can, as a result, encourage research-led practices in the arts and humanities to develop a number of interrelated outcomes in partnership with disability advocates and organisations, including:

- the improvement of public understanding of, and everyday engagement with, disability;
- the development of local, regional and international capacities to address issues of access in education for those with disabilities;
- the promotion of interdisciplinary research methods for research-informed policy and future practice;
- the development of legacy programmes through developing communities of practice within cultural and disability organisations;
- the enhancement of multidisciplinary forms of knowledge production and methodologies.

Review of Literature

Persons with disabilities in the OPT are at a great disadvantage, living under Israeli occupation and siege in a social, economic, and cultural state of instability. The political and economic conditions that prevail have placed disability at a lower level on the national agenda (Nasser et al., 2017). Consequently, the arts and cultural sector becomes secondary amidst the political socioeconomic difficult struggles of Palestine. There is a perennial research gap pertaining to arts and disability. Due to this gap, the focus of this literature review will present further context of disability in relation to stigma, occupation, social inclusion, advocacy, and education as it relates to culture and the arts.

The focus on disability has increased in the OPT since the First Intifada in the 1980s, as the number of disabled people increased because of war injuries (World Bank, 2016). “Those who were injured were regarded as heroes. However, while people’s perceptions of war-disabled persons were and still are positive, exclusion of and discrimination against other PWDs prevail” (ibid). This exclusion and discrimination of people with disabilities is still predominant in all aspects, including the arts and cultural field. The impact of the Israeli occupation continues to impact across all sectors of Palestinian life, not least the corporeal and psychical well-being of communities and individuals. Snounu (2019) describes Israeli occupation as contributing to a triple matrix of maiming: “such a matrix begins with targeting the Palestinian body, then continues to destroy the Palestinian infrastructure, which directly debilitates Palestinians, and finally it maintains and increases barriers through check-points, siege on Gaza, and the apartheid wall in the West Bank” (ibid, p.466). The concept of social inclusion for persons with disabilities, more specifically for children with physical disabilities in Gaza, was addressed by Nasser et al., (2017), whereby participants highlighted that the lack of basic needs does not give space for social inclusion as defined by the researcher, including cultural participation. One participant noted: How a full inclusion would be created when I don’t have basic medical supplies in my rehabilitation clinic and suffer chronic financial problems? (ibid).

The lack of basic needs and economic distress of people with disabilities impacts on employability and advocacy. In terms of employment opportunities, the Palestinian Law of the Disabled, 1999/No.4, specifies that at least 5% of the workforce of government and non-government organizations should include persons with disabilities, while encouraging private and non-governmental sector to employ persons with disabilities through the provision of tax exemptions (Abusrour, 2017). However, no clear examples of law implementation are found in governmental, private or civil institutions. Abusrour questions the role of disability NGOs and their policies in relation to persons with disabilities and their impact on public employment policies in Palestine. Nonetheless, the author also highlights that the Law of Charitable Organizations, which most arts and cultural organizations conform to in principle, “does not include provisions that regulate or limit in any way the organizations work on advocacy in Palestine” (ibid).

The issue of stigma and negative perception of people with disabilities is a challenge that further raises the question of how art and culture can play a role in changing such perceptions. This creates an opportunity for art and cultural institutions to work on advocacy in terms of disability, and for NGOs to contribute to both employment of people with disabilities and policy change in this realm. As Holert (2015) suggest “activism or at least readiness to intervene artistically in political, and social processes such as the struggle for social change, the fight against authoritarian regimes or the building and protecting of structures has become somewhat obligatory” (ibid).

In an attempt to understand the human rights needs of youth and adolescents with disabilities in Palestine and Jordan through a qualitative research, Presler-Marshall et al., (2020) recommend moving beyond charitable models. Emphasizing the importance of providing “integrated package of disability-tailored support that includes accessible, appropriate and quality inclusive education and training, access to primary and disability-specific health and nutritional care, formal psychosocial support services, and social protection programmes that

are appropriately targeted and indexed to account for disability. Equally important are safe spaces and recreational opportunities (including through access to digital technologies) that are accessible to adolescents—including girls” (ibid). The role of digital technologies in cultural practices and arts education—as noted in the Further Research section below—is paramount in addressing the digital divide and concerns around inclusion and disability.

The educational system in Palestine is still in its early stages for supporting students with disabilities, although there has been a growth in educational service provision since the Rights of Education for All (1994) was adopted by the Palestinian Ministry of education (Nasir-Tucktuck et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the Palestinian educational system does not focus on arts education in schools and the arts are still considered a secondary subject. No literature was found on arts education and disability within the Palestinian context. However, Biggeri and Ciani (2018) observed through data collected from his research on inclusion that students with disabilities, that there was no sufficient degree of inclusivity in art classes. The degree of inclusivity is higher for students with hearing and mobility impairments than, the authors noted, that of visual and mental disabilities. Biggeri and Ciani associated this difference to the disability itself rather than the presence of support to certain types of disabilities.

Available literature drawing on the performing arts as an empowerment tool in Palestine includes Delphine Biquet (2014) report *Performing Arts as Vehicle for Youth Empowerment—The Case of The Palestinian Circus School*, in which the author explores how performing arts can be utilized as a vehicle for youth empowerment. Through a case study that focuses on the Palestinian Circus School, Biquet explains how such performances develop a sense of confidence through “resisting the outside oppressing forces by finding the ones contained inside oneself” (ibid, p.7). Elsewhere, Bingham and Green (2016) address theories of humour and disability through comedy, focussing on the experience of the American-Palestinian comedian Maysoon Zayid who has cerebral palsy. Zayid uses humour, the authors observe, to re-narrate both the experience of disability and conflict in the Middle East and Palestine. The authors explore how disability and humour can entice audiences to rethink disability and any predetermined perceptions through humour. Although they highlight the fact that “despite the rise of disability humour as a form of activism, scholars have identified disability humour as an undertheorized area” (ibid, p.278).

A number of projects, finally, documented achievements in relation to the contribution of arts to social change and empowerment. In “Reshaping Cultural Policies for the Promotion of Fundamental Freedoms and Diversity of Cultural Expression”, UNESCO focused on the OPT as the chosen beneficiary. The social change and empowerment components of this project were implemented by Art for Heart Institution and the Palestinian Ministry of culture. In the ensuing UNESCO quadrennial periodic report on Palestine in 2020, the project stated that: “Persons with disabilities have access to cultural activities, goods and services; creative productions and art works by talented disabled artists are appreciated and valued; access of persons with disabilities to cultural goods and services enhanced, economic empowerment of persons with disabilities /entrepreneurs through capacity building programmes; psycho-social support of persons with disabilities through the arts helped them express themselves and share their concerns” (Quadrennial Period Report, 2020). Arts and disability as a means to effect access and inclusion was only noted in literature in relation to this one-off project; however, as with many of these projects, it lacked statistical data to support any results.

Arts and Cultural Networks and practice in Relation to Disability

Institutional practices in relation to disability were more prevalent than those of individual initiatives. Many art and cultural organizations have either participated in an event related to disability or have been involved in a project related to disability. Most of the projects were one-off performances for a group of persons with disabilities, for example, or a series of workshops for persons with disabilities teaching music or visual arts. A selection of

Institutions, artists and/or collectives who have directly or indirectly tackled disability themes or initiated related projects are listed below.ⁱ

The Palestinian artist Basel Nasser, working in animation, trained and worked with a group of young people with hearing impairments from the **Palestinian Red Crescent Society's Total Communication School**. This was a continuation of the project "Animation for the Deaf", where artist Jan Caspers and Gary Rosborough trained young adults with hearing impairments. The project was initiated by the British Council in partnership with the Palestinian Red Crescent Society's Total Communication School and Tamer Institute of Community Education. The project started in 2012, with an aim to teach the young adults to create animations and conduct animation workshops. As a result of the workshops and the training provided to these students an animation deaf team was created which continues to work today.ⁱⁱ Through this experience, Nasser was keen to involve the team as co-producers in his studio the "Animation Factory", and the participants produced two animation movies in collaboration with the artist and his team. This project had enabled these participants to continue working on animation movies after the training sessions and they started providing training sessions for other children.

It Was Paradise is a project on disability by Rachel Gadsen, a performance artist with a disability, in partnership with other artists with disabilities. The project started in 2017 and ended in 2019. The project was resourced by Unlimited which is an arts commissioning programme that supports the work of artists with disabilities in the UK and abroad.ⁱⁱⁱ Art workshops were delivered to visual artists in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including a group of 15 women from The Bereaved Women's Group, most of whom have mental health issues and trauma caused by the effects of the Israeli occupation. *Defying My Disability* was developed by Ramzi Maqdisi, a Palestinian film maker who sheds light on disability through his film-making. The film explores the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the Gaza Strip and West Bank through the narration of seven disabled Palestinians, aged from 7 to 28.^{iv}

The work of the collective Basta Theatre combines both theatre and art activism. Working on artistic interventions in the community through performance art and theatre, it is an independent collective that started in 2015 in Jerusalem. Basta Theatre has recently collaborated with the Movement for a Better Life for People with Disabilities in Palestine, who have protested between October 2020 and January 2021 to have a comprehensive, just, and free health insurance for persons with disabilities. Their demands were met on January 5th, 2021. The collective conducted a theatrical intervention and performance co-produced with the movement members entitled "Insurance Basta", in December 2020, during which the actors included persons with disabilities demonstrating the struggles and injustice they face when seeking out health services.

Music Therapy is Al-Mada's flagship program. The organization is the first in Palestine to open a centre dedicated specifically to Music and Art-based therapy. Additionally, the organization has developed and printed the first music therapy manual in Arabic, so that these ideas and techniques can be made accessible to counsellors, social workers, psychologists, educators, and others. The organization introduced this increasingly popular approach to holistic health and mental well-being into Palestinian society and worked extensively with professionals to incorporate these concepts into their daily work. The First Ramallah Group use dance as an advocacy tool for persons with disabilities. In 2014, they organized a training course for trainers on the mechanism of dance for persons with disabilities in addition to an inclusive workshop for dancers with disabilities.^v Partnering with Candoco Dance Company from the UK and the British Council, a dance workshop was held in 2013 in which combined Palestinian dancers and students including persons with disabilities. The workshop culminated in a group of participants with and without hearing impairments dancing in the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival titled "Natural Differences", in late April 2013.

One of the most notable practices on inclusion is the experience of The Palestinian Circus School. The Circus School trains over 300 children in circus skills, including people with

learning disabilities. The Circus started working on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in 2016, through research with local disability organizations on the means and methods of integrating people with learning disabilities. The volunteers were provided with training from a German institute that has been working on disability and circus skills for over 25 years. To date, the Circus School has been working with 22 children with learning disability and Down's Syndrome. Over the last four years, children have acquired circus skills that helped them focus more on their education and boosted their self-confidence, according to one of those involved in the process (Interview with Naif Abdallah, 2021). Abdallah further noted that this experience is on-going, and during the pandemic circus trainers provided the social workers with training to continue teaching the children. The Palestinian Circus School conducted frequent evaluations with the children, the social workers, the circus trainers, and the children's parents. As a result of the training, the School held an inclusive public performance entitled "The Magic of Circus", where 10 children performed, five of whom had disabilities. They have also held the first virtual international "Social Circus" conference in Palestine to promote equal rights and community inclusion in September 2020.

One of the major foundations for culture and arts in Palestine is the A.M. Qattan Foundation who have worked on disability projects and programmes, including "Higher than the Fence", a programme that "provides the removal of imaginary walls and barriers that may prevent children with disabilities from participating fully and effectively in society on an equal basis with others"(A.M. Qattan Foundation, 2019). The programme was produced in partnership with disability-led organizations such as Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children in Gaza, and the Al-Noor Centre for the Blind. In addition, the Foundation conducted the programme "We all Read" which addresses learning disabilities for primary school children while utilizing interactive techniques for developing different levels of reading comprehension.

The British Council has been working with local partners on art and disability through its ongoing programme "Disability and Art". In 2017, the Council hosted a two-day event "Disability and Art: Successes and Challenges" with an exhibition and symposium in partnership with Palestine Red Crescent Society and other local partners. The exhibition included works from persons with disabilities and the symposium and talks on success stories on disability arts. (In 2012 the British Council also worked on the "Amination for the Deaf" project, discussed earlier.) From 2013, the Council worked on art therapy sessions in cooperation with Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation (BASR). Further to that, they partnered with Sareyyat Ramallah and Candoco Dance Company from the UK, holding a dance workshop in 2013. This combined Palestinian dancers and students and included people with disabilities, who performed in the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival "Natural Differences" in 2013.^{vi}

In 2014, Ashtar Theatre produced the play "File on the Shelf" which is the first play in Palestine to include actors with mental disability representing their experience. "File on the Shelf" also relayed stories collected from persons with disabilities. In the same year, Al-Hara Theatre produced the play "Making Sense" addressing gender and disability issues. The project was based on interviews conducted with women from Palestine and Sweden with different disabilities.^{vii} The Popular Art Centre has been conducting "Dabke", traditional dance sessions since 2018 for people with special educational needs. This is in collaboration with Star Mountain Rehabilitation Centre and Jasmine Charitable Society. Children have performed on different stages and the programme is ongoing.

Elsewhere, the Ghirass Cultural Center provides therapeutic courses for children with learning difficulties and addresses issues around underachievement.^{viii} The Vision Association for Culture and Arts (House of Hope) is designed for students with Learning Difficulties and to address similar issues around underachievement. Due to the academic weakness of many students and lack of care for children with special educational needs, the Vision Association for Culture and Arts focuses on developing learning levels for children with disabilities at schools. They support participants through a programme of special studying and the "Learning Through Recreation" Programme. The Tamer Institute has worked in the West Bank and in

the Gaza Strip on several projects addressing the discourse of disability and, specifically, literature and the production of children books. The Institute has produced the children's book *Something from this World* that presented written dreams of people with disabilities. Alongside literary productions, Tamer Institute partnered with Gaza Municipality and artists from Gaza to create an art installation in 2015 representing persons with disabilities. Further to partnering with the British Council and Palestinian Red Crescent Society's Total Communication School they created the "Animated Dictionary of Palestinian Sign Language", along with Learning Sets, to educate and entertain students with hearing impairments as part of the project Animation for the Deaf.

In Gaza, the Basma Society for Culture and Arts introduced a project in 2018 to promote the active participation of persons with disabilities into cultural and social life through community theatre. This project was funded by the International Fund for Cultural Diversity, through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Consisting of a 10-week training programme of 47 participants, the project included children with disabilities. The training revolved around theatre production and scriptwriting. The Basma Society for Culture and Arts also provided animation training for people with hearing impairments. This was a project in collaboration with disability organizations and a campaign supporting persons with disabilities.

Turning to the narrative arts, Hakaya Collective seeks to connect people 'who believe in the importance of stories' both on an individual and societal level.^{ix} The Collective achieves this by running events, festivals and training sessions, whereby people are empowered to share their life stories in the hope of raising awareness and promoting inter-cultural dialogue; it has collaborated with Palestinian NGO Art and Heart to host storytelling sessions for children with disabilities. Such an emphasis on voicing – and sharing – personal stories as a means to increase understanding of and foster empathy between marginalized groups is central to two other storytelling initiatives working in the region – Narrative 4x and the Hands Up Project.^{xi} Meanwhile, Voices Beyond Walls runs digital storytelling workshops for underserved youths in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem,^{xii} while in 2019, the Social Development Forum ran a series of digital storytelling training sessions for women with disabilities, recognising how such skills can facilitate new forms of 'self-expression and empowerment'.^{xiii}

I.1 Methodology

The research methodology used throughout was primarily based on first-hand knowledge of the cultural networks under consideration (through observation, meetings, and previous research), online research, a consultation workshop carried out with key stakeholders, and focused interviews with artists and institutions.

The interviews were undertaken with a particular focus on modes of work and praxis in relation to disability (including concerns around access, cultural policies, the politics of collaboration and representation), and the issue of agency and self-representation. Conducted by researchers based in the report is underlined by critical inquiry, social network analysis, content analysis, visual analysis, case studies, and participant observation. The focus on art practices ensured that the research is largely qualitative with some quantitative analysis of statistics.

This initial mapping of arts and culture actors across Jordan, Lebanon and OPT has been recorded in a database throughout the process and is available through the Disability Under Siege Website (www.disabilityundersiege.org). The research methodology was primarily based on local knowledge of the art scene, as well as further observation and research. The preliminary mapping was carried out by roughly listing all arts and cultural key components, i.e.: artists, collectives, institutions etc. and then investigating each entry through online research, as well as some additional interviews when needed. The aforementioned was carried out with a particular focus on extracting modes of practice in relation to disability, i.e.: methodology and/or policies of access, policies and ethics of collaboration, as well as a reflection on direct or indirect thematic representations of disabilities in the arts and culture sphere.

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About Disability Under Siege

The Disability Under Siege Network+ Project is a co-created programme bringing together a community of researchers, educational practitioners, advocacy organisations and disability led groups in the UK and Middle East. It will contribute to research efforts by providing intellectual and logistical resources that local practitioners need to transform education provision for children with disabilities in conflict-affected countries.

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ⁱ There is an absence of available information on the number of artists and cultural practitioners with disabilities. Through preliminary research, however, there would appear to be a low number of artists with disabilities due to the social, educational and health difficulties they face in general, which does not provide them with the ability to pursue their artistic practice through education.

ⁱⁱ See: <http://www.deafanimation.com> and <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-xIIIN2KuiZNEKnLMmwKMYWGpmyjNfghR>

ⁱⁱⁱ See: <https://weareunlimited.org.uk>

^{iv} See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfmA9s0LwHg>

^v See: <https://www.diakonia.se/en/Info/News--Publications/Latest-news/dance-advocacy-palestine/>

^{vi} See: <https://www.britishcouncil.ps/en/programmes/arts/disability> and <https://www.britishcouncil.ps/en/events/disability-arts-and-social-change-exhibition>

^{vii} See: http://alharah.org/en/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=31:making-senses&Itemid=250 and <https://www.ogonblicksteatern.se/arkiv/vembestammer-kjyab-mtcbw>

^{viii} See: <http://ghirass.org/en/?p=6329>

^{ix} <https://artistatworkksc.com/Hakaya-Collective-Biography>

^x <https://narrative4.com/eia/#nablus>

^{xi} <https://handsupproject.org/>

^{xii} <http://voicesbeyondwalls.org/index.html>

^{xiii} <http://www.sdf-pal.org/en/2019/08/30/i-can-digital-storytelling-training/>