Egypt's Visually Disabled People Plead for Improvement

Lead-in: There are more than 2.2 million people with visual disabilities living in Egypt, most of which suffer from poverty, lack of accessibilities, ineffective educational techniques and governmental negligence; yet they still have hope in life and challenge their physical disabilities along with the disabilities created by the society. Will the status of visually disabled people improves?

"Ameer El Zalam Soundtrack" fades in and plays for 26 sec

People facing physical challenges in Egypt have been suffering for a long time discrimination and lack of accessibilities. Individuals having partial or complete loss of sight are not the least among them.

It is believed that a visual disability must imply total blindness, which is not true.

"Ameer El Zalam Soundtrack" fades out

Visual impairment is any visual condition that impacts an individual’s ability to successfully complete the activities of everyday life.

According to the World Health Organization W-H-O, there are more than 2.2 million people with visual impairment in Egypt, 900,000 of which are totally blind, and yet nearly 80 percent of the causes leading to visual problems could be easily avoided and/or cured through awareness, early diagnosis and accurate medical treatment, which Egypt lacks.

The person with visual disability faces a lot of social problems. Over sympathy might seem the lightest of all, but may actually be the toughest in hurting the person’s emotions.
Khalid Karem, a graduate student in The Faculty of Languages at Ein Shams University specialized in English and Hebrew language who was born with full blindness explains how it is to be blind in Egypt.

**KAREM:** "Ah, because the society told you that you have differences and you are not like them so, you have also differences in day to day life. first of all, when I just wake up, I just have to think how am gonna go to the college or whatever because you find a lot of difficulties in the streets; for example, you just must say ask for help when you just riding car trying to go to the microbus or whatever, you gonna find like the driver is telling you like why you are here? what are you doing in your life? why you are outside? why do not you have someone to help you and whatever so, you just start your day with someone who is trying to depress you this the first thing. after the life goes on and you go in the cars and some stuff like that, you gonna just son a lot of people doing like...something like that; this is, (laughter), this is very depressing so, you just started your day with a like negative pressure on you on you." (1:01)

Natural Sound, traffic noise, plays for 7 sec and fades out

Inaccessibility of streets is another hardship that visually impaired people have to cope with. In most developed countries, sidewalks are designed to help people with visual disabilities to walk confidently without worrying to step over any obstacles or to be run-over by a vehicle. However, this is not the case in Egypt. Sidewalks and pavements that are supposed to help the blind person walk safely are instead occupied by the street sellers, shops and parking cars. Visually disabled people who decide to walk alone in the streets of Cairo put their lives at risk. Karem, recalls his experience walking in Cairo.

**KAREM:** "Actually, I have a friend of mine I was getting out of the work with him. We were trying to walk near the pavement, a man, an average person, was walking with his motorcycle he just hit us and really he caused a tremendous pain and instead of apologizing and some stuff like that, he just started to curse us and our mothers and father or whatever you gonna expect and to be honest with you, we were in a server pain and he just decided to an insult to injury."(:35)
From the visually impaired people's side, they refuse to walk with the white cane that is internationally recognized which facilitates the mobility of the blind person and helps ordinary people to understand that the holder of this cane is a person with visual disability who might need help crossing the roads. Egyptian people with visual disability refuse to use the white cane because they feel that it labels them and in some cases it causes them emotional distress when people make fun of them.

"Ya Mawlay Invocation" fades in and plays for 14 sec

Stereotyping a blind person to be a religious scholar or a Qur'an recite is very common among Egyptians.

"Ya Mawlay Invocation" fades out

Mohamed Elshafie, a freshman student with total blindness at The American University in Cairo A-U-C, explains.

ESHAFIE: "In the commons or the rubber, they usually take the blind to be a sheikh as you said or a musician, or aah aah Qur'an reciter anything of the sort and in the higher classes, they take them to be some kind of walking talking doll, (laughter,) that is to say. People are, of course, kind in many ways and helpful, but they underestimate one in certain things mean by that it is very, (laugh,) which is rather funny, it is very amusing to them to learn that a blind person hasn't got a problem climbing stairs. The Egyptian society needs to learn so much about blindness, needs to learn so much about blind people in order to treat them in the appropriate way (:51)

Not only does visual disability affect the wellbeing of the disabled people, but also compile hardships for their families. Parents who try to incorporate their children in the society are faced by ample difficulties that are not less than those faced by the disabled people themselves. Doaa Mabrouk, a mother of a young man who was born blind and a co-founder of the Parents’ Association for People with Visual Impairment, speaks about her experience as a mother of a visually impaired child.
"One Man's Dream" fades in and plays for 2:09 sec

MABROUK: "I discovered that Mohamed was blind at the age or legally blind at the age of eleven day and of course of a mother who is really young and this is her first child, this was one of the hardest thing that I faced. And then going through the doctors to see if there is anything and the doctor does not understand what does I mean a mother who had a visually impaired child to the extent that one of them told me go and get another one and tell God please help me and find you another kid. And then after this seeing the service and seeing how humiliating are the visually impair, i was really disappointed and then through the years still there is a discrimination against the visually impair and this is in all over the world that is not only in Egypt; in Egypt is much more, but my decision for example to return to Egypt and not live in Canada because I went to Canada for a better life for my son that I find the unemployment in North America among the visually impair was eighty six percent; still people discriminate against visually impair; aah you find that in every single year, I had a problem with his teacher to understand that he will be good; with a school to accept my son it was really hard in Egypt of course, In Canada there is a system, but in Egypt it was very hard to find a school to accept my son at the beginning; after a while, it was okay because he has been a one of the best student in his class so, anyone wants him; even to get his exams and to convince people to let him go somewhere and all the street are so bad, in finding a work and always when he, I always see that a visually impair has to be working as hard as a normal person twice to get the same opportunity like a normal person. (2:09)

"One Man's Dream" fades out

However, not all families can afford to immigrate to a different country for a better life for their disabled children. The other solution is to enroll their children in boarding schools that are exclusive for blind people. Children who enroll in a school for the blind live in seclusion away from the world around them. They are educated and taken care of by teachers and supervisors who are not trained to treat people with visual disabilities. In the schools for blind, a person with low vision or partial sight is forced not to use his vision in any activities believing that this will preserve the remainder of vision which leads the person to become totally blind due to not using his vision. For many people who were educated in schools for the blind regard them as the least beneficial to them.
Elshafie talks about problems facing students enrolled in schools for blind.

ELSHAFIE: "The problems that face the blind umm in education is not concerned with the curricula or anything of the sort because they take the same curricula as everyone else aah things although of course there are some many obstacles, but still educating oneself is manageable, but the thing is that besides the the issues or the problems that face the normal student in under the mmm the Egyptian educational system, the fact that the school is just for the blind makes one very much lacking in experiencing of dealing with society; a thing that I actually did not come to realize until I've entered this university. (:54)

Egyptian governments throughout the years tackled the problem with successive deliberate mistakes and negligence that made the lives of the visually impaired even harder. Insufficient awareness programs, un-inclusive education and laws encouraging discrimination are some of the mistakes that the various governments have made.

According to the Egyptian law concerning higher education, students with visual disabilities are not allowed to be enrolled in sciences majors and they are also restricted to specified majors in the non-sciences sector. The services provided for blind students in the Egyptian governmental university are not much different from that in schools for blind.

As an American institution, the American University in Cairo has a set policy on the rights of students, faculty and staff with disabilities.

Alexandra Gazis, The Student Disabilities Services Executive speaks about services A-U-C provides to students with visual disabilities.

GAZIS: "Students with documented disabilities are offered several services at A-U-C. these services include, but are not limited to faculty notification letters with their accommodations such as extended time on exams, quizzes, note takers to be accompanied during the classes or exams you can have any other accommodations that you need on the letter stated aahah to the faculty. other mmmmm another part of the services we give to students at A-U-C are the assistive technology services that include all auxiliary aids and software reader programs; we have two labs at A-U-C that are specially designed for students for students with disabilities."(:56)
Despite the services provided at A-U-C, still most blind students can't afford it due to its expensive tuition fees.

Though many non-governmental organizations work with the visually disabled people for so long, many of them failed to offer real support and medical improvement because they have focused on the financial support.

However, in 2004, Doaa Mabrouk collaborated with other people and established an NGO that they called "The Parents Association for People with Visual Impairment" which aims at improving the status of people with visual disability through training, rehabilitation and providing support in schools and universities.

The real governments of the people are those which care for the minorities of all kinds. Elshafie speaks about what he feels the Egyptian government could have offered and didn’t.

ELSHAFIE: "Maybe you have detected in my accent that I'm of of rather very British tendencies; if you ask me why, I'll tell you that I as a blind person living in Egypt receive much more support much much more a billions times more than I'm receiving from Egypt; it is very painful to say, but it is the truth. I receive books from England, I receive devices, I receive advice, I receive much much more than I get from Egypt. The people in Egypt are one of the most kind peoples in the world, but at last the system is in every way a mess. We have to change this thing along with the things that we are going to change in the post revolutionary Egypt. The current system with regard to the blind is not working; it has to be modified." (:57)

"Ab'ad Makan" fades in and plays for 45 sec and fades out

The problems faced by visually disabled people in Egypt will remain a major problem that the government has to deal with along with all the other problems that are taking place in Egypt. People with visual disability have nothing, but to hope for a better future.

**Credits:**

Special thanks to Khalid Karem, Doaa Mabrouk, Mohamed Elshafie and Alexandra Gazis for their valuable information and valuable time.

Facts and information about blindness in Egypt is gathered from the WHO's website.

Music tracks used in the documentary are

1-"Ameer El Zalam soundtrack" by Khaled Hammad.

2-"Ya Mawlay Invocation" by Sheikh Sayed Al Naqshbandi.

3-"One Man's Dream" by Yanni.

4-"Ab'ad Makan" by Mascara band.

Natural sound of traffic noise is recorded by Ahmed Ahmed.

Thanks for listening!