

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Marital experience and challenges of women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

Women with disabilities, like all women, deserve equal opportunities for marriage. However, their experiences within marriage remain unclear, making it difficult to effectively address the issue. This qualitative study aims to explore the marriage experiences of women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. The study utilized a developed semi-structured interview to collect data from eight participants registered with a private association in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Data analysis followed the six-step Braun and Clarke (2006) model. The study found that some women with disabilities have positive marriage experiences, but they also face societal negativity regarding their right to marry. Additionally, the support from families and partners is often insufficient. Legal and financial challenges also hinder marital stability. The research area is extremely important due to its impact on the physical and psychological health of women with disabilities, as well as on society. The article concludes by discussing implications for practices and future research. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2025; 29 [3]: 68-75).

Keywords: Marriage; challenges; Saudi Arabia; women with disabilities; qualitative study

Résumé

Les femmes handicapées, comme toutes les femmes, méritent des chances égales en matière de mariage. Cependant, leurs expériences au sein du mariage restent floues, ce qui rend difficile une approche efficace du problème. Cette étude qualitative vise à explorer les expériences de mariage des femmes handicapées en Arabie Saoudite. L'étude a utilisé un entretien semi-structuré développé pour collecter des données auprès de huit participants inscrits auprès d'une association privée à Riyad, en Arabie Saoudite. L'analyse des données a suivi le modèle en six étapes de Braun et Clarke (2006). L'étude a révélé que certaines femmes handicapées vivent des expériences positives en matière de mariage, mais qu'elles sont également confrontées à une négativité sociétale concernant leur droit au mariage. De plus, le soutien des familles et des partenaires est souvent insuffisant. Les défis juridiques et financiers entravent également la stabilité conjugale. Le domaine de recherche est extrêmement important en raison de son impact sur la santé physique et psychologique des femmes handicapées, ainsi que sur la société. L'article se termine en discutant des implications pour les pratiques et les recherches futures. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2025; 29 [3]: 68-75).

Mots-clés: Mariage; défis; Arabie Saoudite; femmes handicapées; étude qualitative

Introduction

Women with disabilities have the right to marry, start families, and experience parenthood, as embodied in Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.¹ However, research evidence suggests that they have fewer opportunities to marry compared to women without disabilities and are more likely to experience more challenges in their marital life including divorce.²

This disparity can be attributed to negative social prejudices and stereotypes towards such individuals. Women with disabilities may be perceived as vulnerable and need constant protection.³ Furthermore, they face a heightened risk of physical and sexual abuse, which can lead to further stigma and shame.⁴⁻⁶ These challenges contribute to a larger issue of inequality. Women with disabilities are not only less likely to get married, but they are face difficulties in accessing

educational opportunities, employment, and health facilities compared to their non-disabled counterparts.⁴ This highlights the importance and urgent need for decision-makers to address these disparities.

In Saudi Arabia, the situation is particularly troubling. Statistics show that around 56% of women with disabilities over 30 years old are unmarried⁷. The severity of their disability can further reduce their marriage prospects. For instance, autism spectrum disorder poses a significant barrier to this.⁷ Notably, Alsawalem and Algraigay reported that societal fear of having children with disabilities acts as a discouraging factor in marrying such women. This implies even if the woman herself doesn't have a disability but one or more of her siblings suffer from a disability.⁸ Investigating the experiences of marriage among women with disabilities can shed light on the difficulties, barriers, and challenges they face. With a deeper understanding of such challenges and potential solutions, we can work on developing plans to empower women with disabilities to fulfill their aspirations for marriage in a normal and successful way.

Women with disabilities often lack self-determination regarding marriage, making it a complex process at all levels. While their sexual needs and desires are comparable to women without disabilities, their body image, sexual self-esteem, sexual satisfaction, and overall life satisfaction are significantly low.^{9-11,2} These challenges significantly impact their marital experiences. Unfortunately, existing literature on marriage and women with disabilities tends to address these issues separately, neglecting the holistic picture.⁹⁻¹¹

One major challenge stems from cultural limitations on their autonomy. In traditional societies, women with disabilities are often expected to be silent, submissive, and obedient, particularly towards male family members who are seen as their guardians.¹² Consequently, they may be pressured or forced into marriage, driven by cultural misunderstandings of disability and a desire for long-term care.¹³ This is distinct from arranged marriages, where families play a role in choosing spouses but respect the individuals' preferences.

Cultural beliefs and a lack of understanding of human rights can motivate families to force

marriage upon their daughters with disabilities. These families may see it to secure their future care, meet financial needs, maintain family ties, and/or uphold cultural/religious traditions.¹⁴ Culture's influence is evident in various contexts in different regions of the world. For example, in rural China, families might strongly oppose marriage proposals from men without disabilities.¹⁵ Similarly, India sees women with disabilities married to men with disabilities, widowers, or those with lower financial standing than the woman's family.¹⁶ In Palestine, families may restrict marriage for women with disabilities deemed physically capable, often due to societal disapproval.¹⁷

Women and men with disabilities face contrasting realities regarding marriage. Men with disabilities may have a perceived right to marry women without disabilities who can provide care.¹⁸ This can limit their options and perpetuate the idea that women with disabilities are primary caregivers. Studies have shown that men with disabilities may prioritize partners who can offer physical assistance, neglecting the potential for fulfilling relationships with other people with disabilities.⁵ However, research also suggests that marriages between people with and without disabilities can be healthy and satisfying.¹⁹ In Saudi Arabia, a local research study on deaf individuals highlights specific challenges. Al-Omari found that deaf people, particularly men, identified unemployment, high wedding costs, negative media portrayals, and communication issues with potential partners (lack of sign language understanding) as significant barriers to marriage.²⁰ Despite facing individual limitations, family pressures, and societal disapproval, many women with disabilities remain determined to build families.¹² Their struggles highlight the constant fight for happiness and the emotional toll of societal reminders of their "disability" and supposed limitations compared to non-disabled women.

The current study aims to explore the marriage experience of women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia, focusing on their perspectives.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the marriage experiences of women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia.

Sample

To gather relevant data, specific criteria were used to select participants. The study included women residing in Saudi Arabia who self-identified themselves as having a physical or hearing impairment and were currently married. Additionally, participants had to be able to provide informed consent and participate comfortably in an interview. Men with disabilities, women with significant cognitive disabilities that would hinder participation, and women in non-marital relationships (divorced, widowed, cohabiting) were excluded from the study.

The sample consisted of 8 participants with ages ranging from 27 to 42 years. The number of years living with a disability varied widely, with a minimum of one year for some younger participants (aged 27 and 28) and a maximum of 20 years for one older participant (aged 42). The majority of participants have lived with their disabilities for 1 to 4 years. According to the data, only one participant (number 4, aged 42) had lived with a disability for over 20 years. In summary, while the participants' ages spanned a 10-year range, their experience living with disabilities showed greater variation.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to gain in-depth insights from participants (See Appendix A). Purposive sampling was utilized to select eight women with disabilities who received marriage support from a private association in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (Tayseer Association). This association was chosen due to two key factors. Firstly, it is the only known organization in the region maintaining a valid database of women with disabilities seeking marriage and family life. Secondly, the participants' characteristics aligned with the study's objectives. Specifically, all eight women faced financial challenges that hindered their ability to marry independently or with support from their families. As a result, they required assistance from the association to achieve their marital goals.

Data collection occurred between May and November 2023 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Each participant was interviewed independently using the semi-structured guide until data saturation was

reached. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study. Additionally, they were provided with written consent forms. All interviews were conducted confidentially and averaged 45 minutes in length. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim by the authors, and then translated from Arabic to English. To ensure data accuracy and credibility, both the Arabic and English transcripts were reviewed by an independent expert specializing in the disability field and fluent in both languages.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed the six-step thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke.²¹ The process began with familiarization through in-depth reading of all transcribed interviews. Subsequently, the authors engaged in initial coding, identifying, and systematically assigning codes to relevant features across the entire dataset. Coded data segments were then collated based on their respective codes. Next, these codes were further organized into potential themes by grouping related data segments. A thematic map was then generated to visualize and refine the identified themes, leading to the creation of clear definitions and names for each theme. Finally, the analysis culminated in the development of a comprehensive report that narrates the full story as it relates to the research objectives and existing literature.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at Hail University before commencing the research. The reference number for this is H-2024-131

Results

The current study identified five key themes through thematic analysis: (1) societal attitudes towards the marriage of women with disabilities; (2) support of marriage for women with disabilities; (3) challenges of marriage for women with disabilities; (4) ingredients of successful marriage and (5) advocacy for disability rights. These themes are explained below.

Theme 1: Societal attitudes towards marriage of women with disabilities

In general, there is low level of acceptance and presence of negative views on marriage prospects for such females. Society doubts women with disabilities can have successful marriages or worries about offspring with disabilities. One participant (W8) elaborated this issue by saying: *“The society believes that if we (women with disabilities) get married, we will give birth to children with disability, even if we married to men without disability”*. Likewise, there is also a perception of dependence as society views women with disabilities as needing constant assistance, questioning their suitability for marriage. *“People believe that women with disabilities need assistance all the time, and therefore, they should not marry”* stated by a woman (W2). Public scrutiny and discomfort are other related yet important issues. Public stares and judgment can make women with disabilities uncomfortable in public with their partners.

“My partner is a great man, and he understands me and accept me as I'm. However, when I out with him, people are staring at us like why a healthy man married to a woman with disability? This freaks me out and prevent me from practicing my life normally and publicly. After many incidences, we avoid public places as much as we can.” detailed another candidate (W1).

Furthermore, social comparison and jealousy towards such women from women without disabilities also exist, as they may feel jealous of married women with disabilities. The reason has been explained by couple of participants: *“Because they (women without disabilities) are still singles”* said one woman (W6) and another stated: *“Did not have the chance to get married when they compare themselves to our situation”* (W1). Another closely related factor, which can be linked to cultural problems, is pressure for secrecy. Societal disapproval can force women with disabilities to have secret weddings.

“One of my neighbours is not happy with our marriage because my partner is healthy. They think that he deserves a better woman. This is why I get married secretly not publicly so only our close relatives can attend our wedding day” (W4).

An additional problem is social status and marriage in many societies. Marriage is seen as a

marker of social status, pressuring women with disabilities to marry young. A participant (W8) has highlighted this by explaining:

“Women with and without disabilities always compare themselves with their social status (married or single), how many kids they have and dose their homes stable (meaning no problems leads to divorce). This is why women with disabilities accelerate their age of marriage by seeking the support from private association”.

Theme 2: Emotional support for marriage

Emotional support at all levels is essential for success of such marriages. Support provided by family members and partner in the form of love, encouragement, and motivation. This is elaborated by participants:

“I receive a full love, support, and motivation from my family. They did everything to me and try to involve me in every step. I'm glad that I receive this support” (W1) and *“My partner was supportive before and after getting married... He always makes sure that I receive the kindness treatment from everyone because he wants the best for us”* (W2, W4).

Similarly, feeling of safety and being comfortable is equally important. The sense of security and ease fostered by the support received from family, contributing to emotional well-being. *“Generally, the provided support makes them 'feel safe' and 'comfortable'”* (W6, W7).

Importantly, accommodations for disability matters a lot. Actions taken by partners to accommodate the specific needs arising from the disability of their spouse. A participant (W6) has pointed out: *“My partner learns and speak sign language only for me”*.

Theme 3: Lack of social and financial support poses challenges to marriage

Lack of support from public institutions is an important matter to be managed. Challenges arising from inadequate support from governmental and non-governmental institutions. A woman (W5) has explained importance of such support: *“If we have strong police that support our needs and rights, we will get the support we need form everyone including government and non-government institutions”*.

Limited support affects various aspects of marriage. Recognition of the need for comprehensive support that encompasses various aspects of life beyond education is of utmost importance.

“Support should not be explosive to education opportunities; it should cover all aspects that impact our lives” highlighted by a participant (W8). Communication barriers also pose a lot of challenges. Negative consequences resulting from communication barriers in crucial situations, such as healthcare settings.

“It is hard for me to communicate with the people because I'm deaf. Especially in my emergency time such as in hospital” (W4).

Dependence on financial support is a special issue linked with disabilities. Reliance on external financial assistance, particularly due to limited employment opportunities due to disability. A woman (W1) has mentioned:

“I think having a job and to be an independent is important to me especially when I get married. Me and other women are seeking financial support from private association to get married”.

Lack of job opportunities is an important challenge for such individuals. Constraints faced in securing employment, often attributed to societal barriers and policy inadequacies puts a pressure and increase the problems for disables.

“The lack of jobs for them is related to the 'lack of accessibility in most of the public places' and 'lack of policies that support the rights of women with disabilities’” mentioned by a couple of participants (W3, W8).

Theme 4: Common Ingredients for a Successful Marriage

Love, respect, understanding, and acceptance are the key ingredients for saucerful marriage experience. The core values perceived by participants as crucial for a successful marriage. All the participants generally believe that respect, love, understanding and acceptance between them and their partners are a strong foundation towards successful marriage. Encouragement and empowerment are critical.

Motivational messages encouraging other women with disabilities to pursue marriage and independence.

“Stop thinking about our disability and look forward to the future, we have a high chance to become independent and married”

A message delivered by a participant (W1). Self-control and responsibility are critically important. Asserting autonomy in decision-making processes related to marriage and taking charge of the event.

“Our religion, culture and values are given us the right to choose whom we want to marry, when and how” (W3). Being actively involved and consulted in all aspects of the marriage process.

“I was consulted about everything from the first moment of my marriage” (W4).

An important practical aspect is prioritizing health before marriage. Emphasizing the importance of seeking medical advice before marriage to address health issues, participants (W2, W3) have mentioned: *“Respondent also highlighted that they should take more time to visit doctors before they decide to take a step towards marriage.”* Fulfillment of sexual needs and desires also matters a lot. Acknowledging the significance of addressing sexual needs and desires for a successful marriage. *“This will help them prevent any health issues upcoming and simultaneously fulfill their sexual needs and desires”* (W5). Prioritizing treatment over disability. Placing importance on how the partner treats them rather than their disability status. *“I do not prefer if the man with or without disabilities, what really matters is how he will treat me”* (W8).

Financial status may not be a priority in all cases. Financial status of the partner is not a decisive factor in partner selection. *“They also do not concern about the financial degree of the partner; therefore, they may marry someone financially low not because they have disabilities but because it is not their priority”* (W1, W2).

Theme 5: Advocacy for disability rights

There is a dire need to spread awareness related to disability and its advocacy. Advocating for increased awareness and support for the rights of women with disabilities in society is important to enhance understanding and acceptance. *“Responsibility should be pointed to the stakeholders, who need to enhance the awareness of the society about the rights of women with disabilities”* (W2).

Governmental policy review is also a need of time. Calling for governmental review and action on policies affecting women with disabilities can change current situation and improve it.

“Government should start to review the work of the authority of people with disability, since they are responsible for our polices” (W3, W5).

Support in marriage, employment, and services for women in disability should be a priority. Advocating for governmental support in areas such as marriage, employment, and social services. *“They should have bigger role in supporting women with disabilities. They should support our marriage, employment and service that may make use beneficial in the society” (W1, W4)*

Discussion

This is the first study to explore how women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia experience marriage. While the participants reported feeling happy within their marriages, the study reveals negative societal attitudes towards their right to marry. These negative attitudes mainly stem from two misconceptions. First, society often views women with disabilities as requiring constant assistance, questioning their suitability for marriage. Second, there is a fear that marriage to a woman with a disability will lead to children with disabilities, even if the partner is healthy. This aligns with existing research by Alsawalem and Algraigray where societal beliefs discourage marriage between men and women where only one partner has a disability due very same fear described above.⁸

This study sheds light on the experiences of women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia who choose to marry. While participants reported satisfaction within their marriages, they also faced societal disapproval, particularly from other women. Family and partner support, though valuable, proved insufficient to overcome legal and financial barriers hindering marital stability. Notably, prioritizing compatibility over a partner's health status emerged as a key theme. Participants emphasized the need for increased societal awareness of their marriage rights and pathways to independence and social contribution.

Marrying healthy men can further exacerbate these negative attitudes. Public scrutiny intensifies when the couple is seen together, prompting some women with disabilities to opt for private weddings. This highlights the impact of social prejudices rooted in gender stereotypes, where women with disabilities are often seen as

weak and dependent.³ To address this issue, the Saudi government should implement initiatives to raise public awareness regarding the rights of women with disabilities and actively support their marriages.

Another factor contributing to societal negativity is the pressure on women with disabilities to marry earlier than their non-disabled counterparts. Cultural norms elevate social status through marriage, leading to pressure to marry young. This can create a situation where women with disabilities face greater difficulty finding partners compared to women without disabilities. Overall, the study sheds light on the social barriers faced by women with disabilities seeking marriage in Saudi Arabia. It emphasizes the need for interventions that promote social acceptance and dismantle discriminatory beliefs.

The study found that even though women with disabilities received support from family and partners, there were still challenges they faced when getting married. Legal limitations stopped them from getting resources that could help them, and a lack of money meant some had to rely on charities. Because of these challenges, women with disabilities were less likely to get married, have good jobs or education, and have good health compared to women without disabilities. This points to existing gender inequality that needs to be addressed.

The participants also said that respect, love, understanding, and acceptance between them and their partners were important for a happy and successful marriage. They also said it was important for them to be independent, think about the future, and be brave enough to consider their abilities. This seems to contradict other research that found cultural reasons sometimes stop women with disabilities from having a say in their marriages. There have also been reports of women with disabilities being forced to marry.

Overall, the study shows a complex situation where cultural norms, support from society, and the choices women with disabilities can make all play a role in their marriage experiences in Saudi Arabia.

This study reveals interesting differences in marriage preferences between women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia and Palestine. In Saudi Arabia, women prioritize compatibility and emotional connection over a partner's disability

status or financial situation. They are comfortable marrying someone with a lower income, highlighting these factors as less important.

This contrasts with Palestine, where cultural pressure and family expectations often force women with disabilities to marry men with disabilities, widowers, or those with lower financial standing.^{17, 16}

Despite these regional variations, research by Abedi *et al.* (2018) suggests that marriages between people with and without disabilities can be healthy and lead to greater satisfaction for both partners.¹⁹

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2024) affirms the right of women with disabilities to marry, start families, and experience parenthood.¹ To address existing inequalities and increase marriage rates for women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia, the government should assess the effectiveness of disability authority policies. Current policies may not be adequately promoting equal opportunities and access between women with and without disabilities.

This study calls for government implementation of policies that actively support marriage, employment, and social services for women with disabilities. Empowering them in these areas can enhance their societal contributions and create a sense of normalcy, allowing them to live lives on par with women without disabilities.¹²

Limitations, suggestions, and practical implications

The study's findings are limited by its focus on self-reported experiences. Social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses, potentially minimizing negative experiences. Additionally, the sample size may not fully represent the diverse experiences of women with disabilities across Saudi Arabia. Future research employing larger and more geographically diverse samples could provide a more comprehensive picture. Yet, our research is a pioneer study in Saudi Arabia highlighting this very important social issue.

This study offers valuable insights for policymakers and future research in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, developing and implementing policies that uphold women with disabilities' marriage rights is crucial for promoting equality and justice.

Secondly, financial support programs can empower these women by fostering financial independence and job opportunities. The Saudi authority of people with disabilities should re-evaluate its support structures to better address the specific needs of women seeking marriage.

Future research should delve deeper into the pursuit of equal rights and opportunities for women with and without disabilities in Saudi Arabia. Given the identified negative attitudes and challenges faced by women with disabilities, exploring the impact of these factors on marriage stability warrants further investigation. Additionally, future studies could examine the level of marital stability between women with disabilities and their partners, regardless of the partner's disability status.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors contributions

Yasir A. Alsamiri, Ayesha Alnemah Alaghdaif, Seham D. Alfaidi and Malik Asif Hussain analyzed the data and wrote the manuscript. Ibraheem Mohamed Alsawalem, Basheer Ali Allouash and Yasir A. Alsamiri collected the data and organized it. Malik Asif Hussain, Ibraheem Mohamed Alsawalem and Basheer Ali Allouash performed critical reviews, rewritings, and edits of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the conceptualization of the study and provided final approval to the manuscript submitted for publication consideration.

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