How to Enable the Disabled in Turkey | Mark Sidi-Sarfati

I. Disabled Population in Turkey: Objectives, Definitions & The Human Rights Problem

“Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.”
— Rumi

In Turkey, according to the report by Turkish Statistical Institute, there are approximately 8.5 million disabled people, constituting 12.29% of the total population (“Turkey Disability Survey” 5). This was a surprising statistic for me because it is almost impossible to encounter disabled people on the streets. When I wondered why, I realized that it is because they barely can go out on the streets and live a normal life. It is not only because of the underdeveloped infrastructure of the cities but also the mindset of the society. Turkish people are usually very accepting; nevertheless from my own experience I can definitely state that disabled people are not seen as a part of the society. It is sad for me to state that they are often pitied, and only pitied. In the land of Rumi, known for its tolerance and diversity for people of different races and nationalities, it is sad to witness that disabled persons are outcasted from the society.

Even though laws protect the rights of the disabled persons, there are problems associated with abuse in care centers. There are also barriers in front of these people from benefiting from public services. Yet, the roots of the problem are related to discrimination. In accordance with the report of Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) “Behind Closed Doors: Human Rights Abuses in the Psychiatric Facilities, Orphanages and Rehabilitation Centers of Turkey”, mental health hospitals, rehabilitation centers and disabled persons care centers have not been providing sufficient medical care or treatment and cases of abuse have been widely reported (Ahern and Rosenthal 11). In addition, many public services are not provided to disabled people resulting in an obvious case of discrimination. Disabled persons are discriminated against both explicitly through lack of proper healthcare, isolation by families and implicitly through inefficient public services and underdeveloped infrastructure. As a result of these issues, they suffer from a plethora of disputes related to their living conditions, physical and mental health.

The problem is an issue of health and politics. However at its core, it is an issue of human rights. Obviously, to improve the lives of disabled persons, a lot has to be done in terms of laws, regulations, public services and infrastructure. Yet, the most important thing to do is to include them into the society. The article, “Turkey’s Many Disabled, Long Shunned by Society, Play New Role in Politics” highlight that “failures to
address the causes of disability or fix antiquated social services” have left disabled Turks “seemingly invisible” (Sussman). This invisibility starts from the childhood and lasts during life. The article includes an interview with one of the few disabled members of the congress, Safak Pavey. Pavey addresses that many disabled children in Turkey “live hidden from view, out of sight of neighbors, of guests, of the community” (Sussman).

From my own experience and observations living in Turkey until the age of 19, you do not get to see disabled people out in the streets, in restaurants, in television etc. For example, I had a friend with an older sister, who had a mental disability from birth. Even though, I knew that person from childhood, it was until recently when I learned about his older sister. From a civilian point of view, you would think that are not many disabled people here in Turkey because you would rarely see them. But that is not the truth. They are often left home or in inadequate care centers, as the streets of Istanbul or Izmir or Ankara are not suitable for them. When I first moved to North America, I was amazed to see that a lot of disabled people were involved in daily life and in regular activities like sports, school, etc. I was even more surprised to see them alone, without any help, walking on the streets, eating in restaurants or going to schools. Unfortunately, that is not the case in Turkey. Let alone being independent, disabled persons in Turkey are often shunned from communities.

In this research project, I plan to demonstrate the barriers in front of the 8,5 million disabled people. I want to see why they cannot be independent and why they cannot benefit from public services on an equal basis with other citizens. To find solutions for this issue, I want to dig deeper into both explicit and implicit barriers. As a result, I want to recommend solutions that will help to break the bias against disabled persons, educate the public and improve public services and infrastructure. In other words, I want to explore the ways to enable them.

“How much can we hope to understand those who have suffered deeper anguish, greater deprivation, and more crushing disappointments than we ourselves have known?” — Orhan Pamuk, Snow

The phrase “disabled persons” is obviously too broad. Having a grandmother with a disability, I feel bad categorizing people with certain defects. On the other hand, in order to dig deeper into this problem definitions are very important. As there are many types of disabilities as well as many different types of rights that are being violated in regards the persons with disabilities, the first thing I need to do is provide clear definitions. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to clarify definitions regarding disabilities and discrimination. It is also important if we want to understand them. The best way to do so is to briefly evaluate “The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, which is an international human rights tool, prepared by the United Nations. The Convention, which intents to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, is signed and ratified by Turkey. “Disabled” persons are defined as “people who have difficulties in adopting societal life and meeting daily needs as a result of a congenital or acquired loss in physical, mental, sensual or social abilities at various
degrees and who need protection, treatment, rehabilitation, consultancy and/or support services”. So, “disabled” people include mentally disabled, hearing disabled, visually disabled, orthopedically disabled, speaking disabled, people with psychological or mental illnesses as well as people with chronic diseases. Convention’s guiding principles include non-discrimination, promoting full and effective participation and inclusion in society. The absence of such principles causes persons with disabilities suffer physically and mentally.

The report “Survey on Problems and Expectations of Disabled People”, prepared by the Turkish Statistical Institute, offers more clear definitions about different types of disabilities that are present in Turkey. This survey, which aims to define the problems and expectations of disabled people, is very extensive and will be used as an importance source as it includes feedback from more than 280,000 registered disabled individuals. The report defines persons with disabilities as “those who up to different extents lost their physical, mental, sensorial, social abilities at birth or due to an illness or accident occurring after birth and unable to meet daily life requirements” (“Survey on Problems and Expectations of Disabled People” 10). Officially disabled persons in Turkey are categorized into 8 groups. The 8 different types of disabilities listed by the government report are: visual disabilities, hearing disabilities, language and speech disabilities, orthopedic disabilities, intellectual disabilities, mental and emotional disabilities, chronic illnesses and finally multiple disabilities (“Survey on Problems and Expectations of Disabled People” 11). It is important to note that all of the people with different disabilities have different issues. But the main problem they face is mutual. Unfortunately, almost all of the disabled persons in Turkey are outsiders.

The changes, which will be suggested by this research project, will involve many steps from working with institutions about the issues about healthcare and rehabilitation facilities, to raising awareness to include disabled individuals into the society, which is the core of the problem. Main objective of this research will be to find solutions to ensure that disabled individuals’ rights are not violated and that they are included in social life with proper access to health care, transportation etc. This investigation will aim that human rights violations are not committed in facilities for disabled individuals. The paper will suggest solutions improve disabled individuals’ living conditions, mental and physical health as well as mitigate the violations that cause them misery and torment. The quote by Rumi will be my starting point because I want my country to embrace all of its citizens and become a more humane place to live.

“Can you see me? All of me? Probably not. No one ever really has.”
— Jeffrey Eugenides, Middlesex

Out of sight, hidden inside homes, disabled people in Turkey are almost invisible. I think at this time it is not even a choice for them. They—or their families—prefer to be invisible because they are afraid they will be seen like freaks. If not freaks, they do not
want to be stared at or they do not want to see children pointing at them or people avoiding looking at them. Obviously these observations are more relevant for those who have visible disabilities. Nonetheless, for most of the disabilities no one can really see them. No one can get to know them. And if the understanding is not changed, no one will truly see them. I think this is frustrating because just like the victims of race, gender or ethnicity discrimination, the issues disabled persons are facing are against basic human rights principles. As a person without any disability, I cannot think of not having friends or people to connect with. For me the most important thing in life is connection and without connection, I do not find much meaning in life. When my grandmother had a stroke and lost her abilities to walk and talk, I knew that what hurt her most was not being able to connect with people. This was because she lost her link to life even though we tried so hard to keep her included. My firsthand knowledge, without reading any reports, suggest that what matters the most for people, disabled or not, is inclusion into life. For disabled people, obviously, this is harder. However, I know for sure that eventually they want to be seen and be understood.

There are so many issues regarding the violations of the rights of disabled people here in Turkey. However, not many of them are officially reported. The core of the issue is related to inclusion into normal life and the core objective would be adapting the conditions to make them access healthcare as well as access communities. If they were part of the social life and if they were able to access proper healthcare, Turkey would be able to eliminate problems regarding continuing mental issues that disabled persons suffer from. Accessing proper healthcare and public services is key for including them into normal life. Disabled people are facing many problems about accessing basic preventive and rehabilitative healthcare services, as well as any type of public service.

According to MDRI’s report “Behind Closed Doors”, there are no available support systems for people with disabilities. As a result, unfortunately, “they cannot fully be part of society, enjoy relations with family members and friends, and take advantage of educational opportunities, work and cultural life”. According to MDRI’s report, “without such support, people with mental disabilities in Turkey are often segregated from society in institutions or their own homes” (Ahern and Rosenthal 14). In addition, access to proper healthcare services is another problem as mentioned above. There have been problems in direct service access.

“wounded and disabled
asleep in dusty anthology
slumber until awoken by
reader.”—Jimmy Burns, The Enjambed Body

In addition to absence of support systems, inclusion to social life is another big concern. Disabled individuals in Turkey are facing barriers that rise from the physical inaccessibility of the social environment as well as the discrimination exposed by other people. This is hindering their independent life and involvement into the society, making
them dependent to facilities that are lacking proper care. Barriers in the physical environment include non-disability accessible buildings, roads and transportation, especially for disabled individuals who cannot walk or transport by themselves. “The Research on Measurement of Disability” report, prepared by Turkish Prime Ministry Administration for Disabled People, elaborates on that accessibility of the physical environment is a very important mean of eliminating disability discrimination (Aktas 45). According to their research, in Europe, including Turkey, accessibility of physical environment is generally not very successful, as cities are older. Unfortunately, they found Turkey to be one of the most exclusionist countries based on disabled people. According to the report, the inaccessibility of the physical environment including the roads, areas, transportation networks and buildings is the norm; accessibility of physical environment is the exception. Not only in rural areas but also in urban areas, pedestrian transportation is not accessible to disabled people (Aktas 46). According to “Turkey Disability Survey”, prepared by Turkish Statistical Institution, only “3% of the sample group stated that they had the proper arrangement for their disability in their street or road, approximately 67% stated that there were no arrangements for their disability in their living areas and approximately 20% answered that they did not even know if there was any arrangement or not” (“Turkey Disability Survey” 30). So, not only arrangements for disabilities are insufficient, awareness among the disabled is low as well. In addition to lack of accessibility for transportation, schools and businesses do not provide proper accommodations to disabled employees or students, even though they hire or enroll them.

Some of the most egregious human rights violations include access to healthcare as well as the conditions of these facilities. In institutions, reported violations include arbitrary detentions, the inhumane and pervasive use of electroconvulsive or “shock” treatment (ECT) without the use of anesthesia especially for mentally disabled people. There is an absence of enforced law or procedure for independent judicial review of commitment. These facilities, especially mental facilities, are detained arbitrarily, in violation of the international law and ratified UN conventions (Ahern and Rosenthal 4). The report by MDRI talks about how painful, frightening and dangerous the unmodified form of ECT can be, adding that it also violates the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture (ECPT) (Ahern and Rosenthal 2). MDRI conducted a two-year investigation in Turkey to expose the human rights abuses committed against people with mental disabilities. They observed that these locked away people with psychiatric disorders and people with mental retardation are subjected to torture or inhuman conditions in treatment facilities. As a result, they reported that these degrading and inhumane conditions are violating ECPT, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They use ECT as a punishment without the use of anesthesia. They also leave patients without any choice. Patients are not able to refuse the treatment. They are also often being lied to. These facilities over-use the ECT, causing people to die, even though there is no clinically proven justification of the treatment (Ahern and Rosenthal 12). In addition to the inhumane ECT treatments,
bedridden children who are unable to feed themselves due to their disabilities are left without assistance by staff. As a result, they are left dehydrated and starved (Ahern and Rosenthal 22).

Another issue regarding persons with disabilities is the lack of rehabilitation and medical care. According to MDRI’s report, “there is a broad lack of rehabilitation and physical therapy for children and adults with disabilities detained in orphanages and rehabilitation centers” (Ahern and Rosenthal 13). These centers are left to deteriorate for years. According to “Turkey’s Many Disabled, Long Shunned by Society, Play New Role in Politics”, “families with disabled children are praying for their kids to die before them, because they have no support systems” (Sussman). There is also an effect of living without caretakers, which cause people with disabilities to become self-abusive. Facilities don’t offer assistance to self-abusive persons in facilities other than tying them down (Ahern and Rosenthal 13).

Disabled individuals in Turkey are excluded from society by direct and indirect ways and the care provided to them violates basic human rights. The conditions are getting worse everyday as other health issues—especially mental—arise with disabled individuals. Even though law protects their rights, these laws are not applied properly, causing disabled people to suffer even more.

II. Insights and Observations on Problems Regarding Public Services and City Planning

“When you love a city and have explored it frequently on foot, your body, not to mention your soul, get to know the streets so well after a number of years that in a fit of melancholy, perhaps stirred by a light snow falling ever so sorrowfully, you’ll discover your legs carrying you of their own accord toward one of your favorite promontories”
—Orhan Pamuk, My Name is Red

The disabled people in Turkey constitute more than 12% of the population (“Turkey Disability Survey” 5). This rate is quite big and conveys the truth about the disabled people in the country. No one without the background would be able to guess that 12% of the population is disabled. It is because they are not out there, as I stated a lot of times before. They are not out on the streets, because they cannot be. Disabled people cannot be outdoors without any help! But, they also have the right to independently explore their cities and love them. Maybe they cannot explore the cities in a way that Pamuk means. Yet, their souls deserve to discover the outdoors. They should be able to have a favorite promontory; it does not matter if it is not their legs that take them there, or if their eyes do not see the sea itself. They should have the independency to see or smell or feel or hear their city or their village. They already have limitations; I cannot help but question, why do we have to limit them further.
The needs of the disabled people might be different than those who are not. On the other hand, some of their needs are the same, exactly the same. Just like everyone, they need to explore themselves, their souls, and their surroundings. They also need to get fresh air, go to parks, feel the rain, or the sun and smell the trees. It is not only the nature that they need; they need to shop for their own groceries, clothes, books and so on. Indeed, it is not only about what they need to exist, it is about what they need to live, not merely exist. So, it is about what they want as well. When you observe developed countries and the humane living conditions of the disabled population, one could see that it is not that difficult to enable them at all.

Obviously, creating a positive perception is key to enable them. The disabled population should not be characterized as a different or separate section of the society. Instead, they should be integrated into the communities. To be able to achieve this, the accessibility of the physical environment is a must. Other issues related to the lives of the disabled people are rehabilitation, private/family life and employment. However, the accessibility of the cities is needed to solve all of these other issues. Accessibility of the environment is the first step because when the disabled population can go outside, people will be more used to seeing them and a more positive perception could be created as a result. If the cities undergo changes according to the needs of the disabled population, including them into the society would become a more natural process. Stakeholders that should be after this goal of making the physical environment accessible include central and municipal/local governments, trade/profession associations, NGOs and the media.

While planning communities, societies and cities and while creating a model for the society, it is of utmost to consider everyone. Unfortunately, given that Istanbul, and most of the cities in Turkey are very old and city planning activities are conducted to increase luxury not practicality, disabled people of Turkey cannot utilize our cities. In many of our cities, there are factors that deter the access and transportation of disabled people. Streets, sidewalks, pavements, public buildings, parks, gardens, schools, houses, transportation vehicles and many environmental elements are obstacles against the disabled to become a part of the society. The inaccessibility of these elements further limit their movements and therefore disable them even more. This means that they are further out casted from the society whilst these elements could be designed or improved in a way that they enable the disabled.

While I was spending time in Istanbul and my home town Izmir during the weekends, I tried to pay attention to obstacles that a disabled person could face when living in a city. It is important for me to note that my observations are from the most developed cities in Turkey. While Istanbul is Turkey’s most populous city, Izmir is Turkey’s third largest city (TURKSTAT). Even though both have older infrastructures, they are supposed or perceived to be the most “modern” ones. I went to different neighborhoods in both of the cities, lower income, higher income, metropolitan etc. The only places without many obstacles were the newly built malls. Even in those, I noticed,
people were occupying the restrooms for the disabled because they were empty. Other than the malls, in almost every neighborhood I visited I faced a lot of obstacles that would further limit the lives of the disabled population. Even in Istanbul’s high income neighborhood Etiler’s popular street with luxurious restaurants, there were many hindrances for the disabled. I noticed a new café that opened up almost 2-3 months ago. The café, which was higher from the street level, had an escalator that was composed of 7 steps. The escalator was one way, just going up. It made me quite sad because it made me realize, once again, that every transformation in the city, is for show only. If they were able to do a flat, two-way escalator, that moderate and affordable café would be able to accommodate disabled people. But the 7-step-short escalator literally had not purpose. When I went inside, the restrooms were on the lower floor, but they were luxurious as the toilets of a Four Seasons Hotel. This story conveys the truth about the recent building or city planning in Turkey. It is far away from being practical and really all about show.

Moving on the obstacles that I observed, I must note that there were more than expected. Those obstacles that I noticed without having a disability include streets with distorted surfaces, infrastructure projects without the necessary security measures, high sidewalks, high public phones and ATMs that cannot be reached by people with wheelchairs, transportation systems and vehicles without the proper audio and visual warnings for the people with hearing and visual impairments. In both Izmir and Istanbul, signs for the visually disabled and audio notification for the hearing disabled across many aspects of city life were inadequate. Green spaces like parks and areas for sports are not planned or designed in a way that disabled people could utilize them.

Turkey wing of the UN’s World Handicapped Foundation prepared a report, highlighting the issues that disabled people in Turkey face that are related to city planning. According to the report, a law was passed in 2005 that required all of the public buildings, streets, side walks, open spaces, parks, sports areas and social areas to be accessible by the disabled. However, UN WHF states that almost no real improvement was seen (“Enabled City Planning Report“). In Taksim, one of the most crowded neighborhoods of Istanbul, I saw only one person with a wheelchair, and what is sad is that she was shopping from outdoors. She was showing what she wanted to the employee and paying outside. It was a corporate chain and they failed to provide the store with one portable access ramp.

“For those who are lost, there will always be cities that feel like home.” — Simon Van Booy, Everything Beautiful Began After

Unfortunately, in today’s Turkey that is not the case. Cities scare away the lost disabled people of Turkey, instead of providing a warm home.
III. From their Perspective: Expectations of Disabled Persons in Turkey

A. Case 1: My Grandmother & My Mother

“You were born with potential. You were born with goodness and trust. You were born with ideals and dreams. You were born with greatness. You were born with wings. You are not meant for crawling, so don’t. You have wings. Learn to use them and fly.”
— Rumi

My mother was a very cautious lady, especially about her mother. She was always very scared that something would happen to her, as she lived by herself. So anytime she did not pick up the phone my mother freaked out and called all of her friends only to find out my grandmother was playing cards with them. My mother knew all of the phone numbers of everyone related to my grandmother: her neighbors, friends, doorman, doctors, cleaning lady, even her manicurist. She would speak to my grandmother at least 4 times everyday. My mother, a woman, who can control everything, only had one weakness: her mother. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to control what life brings. I know this because it did not matter how many times my mother checked on my grandmother when my grandmother had a stroke. On a very warm August day in Izmir back in 2008, my mother was again trying to reach my grandmother. As all of her attempts were ending up to be unsuccessful, we stopped mocking her obsession and realized that something actually might be wrong. My mother could not track grandma from her doctor or friends or neighbors. As we were in our summer residence, an hour away from the city, my mother made my uncle and the doorman knock down the door of her house only to find her lying on the ground.

On the way to the hospital, we learned that she had a stroke. What I understood at that moment was that something about her heart blocked the blood flow into her brain. In the hospital, they told us that she might not walk or talk for the rest of her life. The left side of her brain was dying which paralyzed the right side of her body and her speech. My grandmother, the inspiration of my mother, was one of the strongest people I have ever met and we could not believe what they had told us. Devastated the most was my mother; maybe blaming herself that she could not be there at the right moment.

When the doctors told us that they could give a shot to her that would heal a big portion of the damage if we found her within an hour or so, my mother crushed as she did not know when the stroke actually happen. If our guess for the timing were wrong, we would lose her. So, doctors did not want to risk her life. She stayed in the ICU for almost a week and in the hospital room for a month. So did my mother. The doctors told
us that if she gets rehabilitation she might get her senses back and maybe walk a little with help but would never be able to talk other than 3-4 words. My mother brought in neurologists from all over the country, some were more hopeful than the others. As my mother wanted to believe that her mother could get better, she dedicated her life to this goal. The best rehabilitation center for people with physical disabilities was in Ankara, Turkey. It was called Turkish Armed Forces Rehabilitation and Care Center. However, this hospital or this giant center was just for veterans, soldiers and soldier families. It was owned by the government and was the strictest environment I have ever seen. My mother figured out a way to get my grandmother accepted to the institution. I do not exactly know how she managed that but she found someone powerful and did it. That’s the nature of how things work in Turkey. If you find someone powerful or someone close to the government you can achieve anything you want. Maybe that is correct everywhere, but here you can only get around if you pull some strings. As she stayed there for months, my mother settled in Ankara and visited her during the day, which was when visitors were allowed. But, I am sure she managed to extend the hours in the strict army hospital. She also found a speech therapist from Europe, as there were few in Turkey, who visited my grandmother very often.

The doctors were wrong, my grandmother proved. My grandmother got to talk, got maybe half of her speech back. By 4-5 months, she was walking with a cane and with just a little help. The doctors had told us that she would not understand a lot of things, but she ended up understanding and remembering. She became an inspiration to everyone in the rehabilitation center. At the age of 74, she was rehabilitating, showing the 17-year-old girl who had a car accident or the 24-year-old soldier who lost his leg during warfare that they could get well too. She even could sing. As I come to think of the situation, I do not know who proved the doctors wrong, my grandmother or my mother. Probably both. Maybe it was not just my mother’s and my grandmother’s dedication. The doctors, supposedly the best ones, were too hopeless. The lack of faith that the doctors had reveals how inattentive they are for cases like these here in Turkey. Nonetheless, for sure my mother became my grandmother’s wings, she brought out her potential, and she did not let her crawl. Maybe she did not end up flying, as she was 74. But they together showed the younger disabled patients that they have the potential to fly. Later, she moved back into her apartment and lived there for about 3 years with the help my mother hired. My mother visited her everyday, took part in her therapy. She almost became a speech therapist herself. She and her help would take her out into malls or parks and made my grandmother part of normal life. The places they could go were quite limited, as only few of the newly built malls and few parks were wheelchair friendly. In addition, if we did not have a big car that was disabled friendly, it would almost be impossible to travel to those malls that are outside the city center. When we realized that the streets around my grandmother’s apartment were not designed for disabled people, my mother reached a reporter in the city and made her write about the issues related the situation of streets in the neighborhood. Then the local government started fixing the streets in the neighborhood. The environs my grandmother are now wheelchair accessible.
Unfortunately, this situation did not last very long. My grandmother fell down and had her brain hemorrhaging due to the fall. The brain hemorrhage reversed all the rehabilitation and made her worse. Then started the dementia and seldom epilepsy. Obviously, there was not much left for my mother to do. Now, she just can provide her love and care. But, I still find my grandmother’s progress a great success. My mother played a very important role in her rehabilitation. I know for a fact that care and support systems are extremely important for adapting disabled people into normal life. My mother was never embarrassed or hopeless, that is what motivated my grandmother, at the age of 74, to get better and do what was told to be impossible by the doctors. At the army rehabilitation center, many of the patients were quite lonely. Obviously, not everyone has a dedicated helper like my mother. However, there is help, inspiration and motivation everywhere. The improvement of support systems is a must to help disabled population use their potential.

My grandmother was lucky to have someone be her wings to help her get up. She was also lucky because my mother had resources. But, I can never disregard the potential she had inside. Everyone has potential, especially disabled people. Potential, as the name implies, is a strength that is not yet revealed, but waiting to be. If a disabled person sees another one, who knows how to get that potential strength into an actual strength, then that is a great hope and motivation for that person. I learned at the army hospital and also from my grandmother that it is extremely important for disabled individuals to be around each other, motivate each other and learn from each other.

B. Case 2: Selma Olgun

“I died as a mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?”—Rumi
I met with a fearless woman during my grandmother’s rehabilitation. My mother kept the phone numbers of several people who had inspiring stories that made her believe in the potential that disabled people have. One of them was Selma. When I contacted those people, she was the first one to get back to me. My mother guessed that would be the case because she was one of the most giving people we have ever met. As a 16-17 year old teenager back in the time we met her, I was not as interested in other people’s sad stories. So I did not know her very well, until last week when I had the time to interview her. All I knew was that she had paraplegia that was caused by a car accident. I must note that she was quite comfortable and even welcoming when telling her story.

Selma is a 54-year-old woman with two children. She was raised in Germany during the time when a lot of Turkish people migrated to Germany to find jobs. Her parents worked in a factory while her older brothers worked for the Turkish kebab restaurants around Berlin area. She went to high school in Germany and came back to Turkey right after. Her parents wanted her to get married to a Turkish man, fearing that she would become assimilated in Germany. As a result, luckily for her parents, she fell in love with a Turkish man in Istanbul and got married. After she had two children before the age of 30, her husband cheated on her and they got a divorce. That was when she learned that she had to be independent financially and started working for a private company. This tall, blonde and attractive woman was not as lucky. Unfortunately, her life changed when she had an accident during a work trip.

In the spring of 1993, she was out of town for work with a colleague in Antalya, a big city in the Mediterranean Region of Turkey. Her friend was driving the car, as she hated driving. Driving to the city center with a car, they were stopped by the police, who wrote them a ticket for not wearing their seat belts. Indeed, when the police asked them if they had belts on, they had shown their belts on their pants just to make fun. Even after the ticket, she told regretfully, they did not put their seat belts on. As she was reading her book, sitting with her feet crossed on the front seat, they entered a very curvy road and ended up falling 40 meters down. She does not remember those moments well. She does not recall a lot from the accident, but she regrets not wearing that belt. While she went in a coma, later she learned, her friend was found dead after flying off the sunroof of the car they were driving. The damage Selma got was quite serious too. Her rib cage and chest cage were broken, while her lung was burst. Her long blonde hair was ripped and she got 150 stitches on her head. But most importantly, her spine was broken. As the police who got her out at the time did not realize her spine was broken, they had dragged her out of the sunroof, which was the only way out of the car. As her body was not stabilized while the military police carried her for 40 meters, the broken spine in her back cut her spinal cord. This incident caused her paralysis. So, as a result the lower part of body, her legs got paralyzed. Unfortunately, there is no way back to her disease in today’s medicine.
After she woke up in the Florence Nightingale Hospital in Istanbul days later she was found, she went into 9 surgeries. What is shocking is that the police thought she was dead and brought her into a small hospital in Antalya, before her parents got her to Istanbul. When she was admitted they even left her in a room for dead people. However, right after when they realized that she was not dead, they immediately took her into surgery but could not do much as it was not a big hospital.

Her story is obviously sad, but she is comfortable enough to find blame in herself for not wearing a seat belt. Now she is working for a foundation for people with paraplegia. As a person who works for disabled people and as a person who is disabled herself, there is no better source for me to learn about issues that they face. The first thing she highlights is that there is almost no rehabilitation. Even in the best centers like my grandmother attended, not much is offered. She classifies rehabilitation into three sections: medical, social and economic. She believes neither of them is satisfied here in Turkey. She highlights that her family had to sell 3 apartments, as rehabilitation and treatment are overly expensive. She further emphasizes that there are very few experts, specialists and almost no follow-ups. She criticizes that there is no database for people with paraplegia. Her paraplegia foundation estimates the number to be more than 150,000.

Other than the lack of medical treatment and rehabilitation, she thinks the cities are ‘disabled’. She criticizes the roads, the problems associated with entering buildings, restaurants and toilets. She highlights that almost all the time she has to give her ATM card and pin to someone else to be able to get money out of the tall ATMs. But what hurts her most is that she thinks people look at disabled people with pity and only pity, as if they are not human. When I asked her how she remained happy, she told me that there were times when she wanted to die. But later, when she started working with charities, foundations and with other disabled people, she realized she could be happy. Now, she is a fearless, she even visits Taksim, one of the most crowded and old neighborhoods in Istanbul, on a regular basis. She told me that she chose to be strong because she realized that she almost been through death. It is almost like a ‘what does not kill me makes me stronger’ type of situation. She believes there are blessings in life other than having a healthy body. She realized that when she was strong, there were so many people around her. She emphasizes that human interaction is the most important thing in her life and even though she has to try harder, she is up for the job. The interviews I made so far showed me the importance of support systems, morale, as well as getting involved in social life. Demands they have are things that would help them get involved in social life.

Modern bus with disability ramp removed
C. Case 3: Mr. Isik, Sami Anel and Expectations about Rehabilitation

"...once a person overcomes a disability through his own courage, determination and hard work, he has a depth of spirit you and I know little about.....[this] is a branch of medicine in which the patient has more power than the doctor in setting the limits and possibilities...." — Howard Rusk, A World to Care For

According to The National Spinal Cord Injury Association’s (NSCIA) article, “the goal of rehabilitation is to help persons learn how to care for a body that now works differently” (“The Importance of Rehabilitation”). Obviously, this is more relevant for people who become disabled after a disease or injury or accident. Still, it is at utmost importance for the disabled people to get used to their body. This is a crucial step before adapting to life. Like Rusk states, in this branch of medicine, patient has more power than the doctor. But the patient has almost no power without rehabilitation. For
stroke patients or patients who have a neurological problems resulting from a disease or an accident, rehabilitative therapy that begins after the patient is stabilized in the acute-care hospital is vital as well (“Post-Stroke Rehabilitation Fact Sheet”). The early rehabilitation of patients with neurological issues like stroke is very crucial because the first steps that are taken promote independent movement. “Patients are prompted to change positions frequently while lying in bed and to engage in passive or active range of motion exercises to strengthen their stroke-impaired limbs” (“Post-Stroke Rehabilitation Fact Sheet”). Even in the first stages of rehabilitation, nurses and therapists are able to perform more complex tasks like bathing and dressing, encouraging the patients to use their impaired limbs. As a result, in the early stages of rehabilitation, patients can reacquire the ability to carry out “basic activities of daily living”. This represents the first stage in their return to independence (“Post-Stroke Rehabilitation Fact Sheet”).

“In a brutal country like ours, where human life is ‘cheap’, it’s stupid to destroy yourself for the sake of your beliefs. Beliefs? High ideas? Only people in rich countries can enjoy such luxuries.” — Orhan Pamuk, Snow

Last March, the host of the show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire in Turkey, fell down in his gym and had brain trauma. His brain hemorrhaged and he has been hospitalized since. He was an actor, a real artist and an intellectual. He was dearly loved and was a heroic character. Not many real gentlemen are adored here in Turkey. We usually love loud voices and heroism. But, the public really did love him dearly. He made millions of our not very intellectual population watch a cultural TV program. For 10 years, Turkish population watched the show over Soap Operas. It is hard to believe. After giving some background, I could move on to my point. He was hospitalized in the American Hospital in Istanbul, probably one of the best hospitals in Turkey. Then this month, he was moved to the famous German clinic Kliniken Schmieder, specialized in rehabilitating neurological patients. In the newspaper article “Sitting on the Wheelchair for Hours”, the journalist interviewed brother of the TV show host. The brother Mr. Isik, highlights the importance of the care that they got in the American Hospital. But he also underlines that only very privileged people can afford the treatment at the private hospital (Munyar). Given the importance of the early stages of rehabilitation and care, it is very unfortunate that the best care comes at a price.

Another luxury that only people in rich countries or rich people in developing countries can enjoy is rehabilitation and care. In Turkey, only rich people are able to get rehabilitation services and that is usually by traveling abroad. Mr. Isik also mentioned that they could never be able to go to Kliniken Schmieder if they applied through Turkish bureaucrats. He believes that it is such a shame that Turkey does not have centers like this (Munyar). I know from my grandmother that rehabilitation hospital of the Turkish Armed Forces is the best rehabilitation center in Turkey, offering both medical and social rehabilitation. However, you have to have a family member in the army or some sort of a privilege to get accepted.
In developed countries, where human life is a lot more valuable, like Germany and Norway there are rehabilitative camps for the disabled. These camps not only focus on physical rehabilitation but they also focus on social rehabilitation. They offer activities that are not usually available to disabled people. For example, my friend (I am going to call her Sami Anel for this paper) who had a car accident when he was in 6th grade attended one of those camps this summer. When I saw his pictures from the camp on Facebook, I immediately reached out to him and asked him about his experience. As a person, who has been using the wheelchair for years, he told me that it was a life changing experience for him. The camp he went to is called Haraldvangen and was in Norway. I first asked him about Haraldvangen. He told me that he was able to attend activities such as rock-climbing, sailing, waterskiing, canoeing in the rivers and safaris in the forests. He told me that he made a lot of friends and it was almost the first time he had this much fun since the accident. He added that he is going to go back to the camp in the winter and attend their winter programs in which he will be able to experience cross country skiing in special tracks. Later, I asked him if he ever attended such a camp in Turkey. He told me that his family put a lot of research into this and there are no such examples of camps like this in Turkey, even though there are a lot of both winter and summer areas suitable for such a camp. He told me that this spring he went to a center in Samsun, a big city in the north of Turkey. Even though, everything was free other than food, the center just included gyms and pools. The center is supposed to be one of the best in Turkey, built with 3 million USD investment. But now I come to think, is 3 million USD enough investment for the “best” disabled camp in Turkey? Probably not, but it is a start. Sami told me that even though it is a good start, the mentality is still not there. There are very few workers there that truly understand the needs of the disabled. Sami told me that mentality is everything. In Norway, they even had costume parties and hikes with horses. He had the chance to drive a rally car. A rally car, I have not tried that yet! He loved doing things in the nature. He loved being crazy with his superman costume. He loved being normal.

The last thing he told me was, he was lucky to be privileged enough to be able to travel to Norway. Even though, the camp was inexpensive, traveling arrangements were not cheap at all. He highlighted the importance of disabled tourism and how it positively influences the life of the disabled by both physically and socially rehabilitating the disabled people.
D. Case 3: Ayse Koray


Ayse Koray, a housewife at 37, is the mother of a 13-year-old boy with Spastic Diplegia, a sort of spasticity. I had a chance to contract her over the phone through a family friend. I wanted to interview her about her experience and the problems that her child has been facing. Obviously, Koray family has been through a lot of pain and suffering. However, during our interview one particular issue stood out. Her son was enrolled in the only public school in Turkey intended for children with spasticity. Unfortunately at the end of 2013, the school was shut down, as their protocol could not be renewed due to some sort of a bureaucratic reason, also unknown by Ayse Koray. Ayse Koray was deeply saddened by this situation as her son has been out of school for a while. She, rightfully, complained that she had to discontinue her son’s education because she did not want him going to a regular school with 40 children in each classroom. She did not want her son to be called out names like “spastic”. She, again rightfully, cried on the phone as she blamed the government for forcing her child to stay inside their small apartment. She said that the government had announced before that another school would open in 2013; nonetheless, the place is not even determined as of August 2014. She and the other parents of 45 other children enrolled in the school in Istanbul believe that the government has the resources to open at least one school. I, then, asked her if there were other options. Her response was even more unsettling that her only other option would be a private school that asks for so much money that they would not be able to afford. When, I researched online, I found just one article about the issue. The article “Disabled Minds”, states that the tuition for the only other school for children with spasticity is almost $20,000 per year (“Disabled Minds”). Options for specialty schools for disabled children are quite limited, for some disabilities they are non-existent.
II. Solutions Part I: Creating a Positive Perception

“If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”—William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Perception is key in almost every aspect of life. How we perceive things shape the choices we make. This applies to societies as well. The problems that disabled persons in Turkey face are rooted in how these people are perceived by the society. Aysegul Domanic Yelce, a disabled Turkish journalist, who writes in one of the most popular newspapers in Turkey, Hurriyet, states that there is not even a common perception regarding disabled persons in Turkey because they are not out there (“A Chat with Aysegul Domanic Yelce” 1). When comparing disability perception in Turkey and in Western countries, obviously the perception in Western countries is far more developed and positive. A positive perception is still not created in Turkey because many of the disabled are not out on the streets due to inaccessibility of almost all of the cities in Turkey. Many of the disabled are embarrassed of their disability or locked inside homes. As the society is not used to seeing disabled people on the streets or even on television, there is not really a common perception at all.

Yelce had never isolated herself and she faced a lot of questions out on the streets, asking, “why she was out” (“A Chat with Aysegul Domanic Yelce” 1). She believes there is two places that could help create a positive perception: schools and workplaces. In order to be able to create a positive perception, school might be a good start. Disabled children should socialize with others. They should be in school with other children especially in classes like music and behavioral classes. If there is a mental disability for example, classes like math, literature or science could be taught with special teachers. Small changes that help disabled children get assistance and socialize are key in creating a positive perception and including them into the society right from childhood.

Secondly, another key aspect in changing perception is changing the behaviors in the workplaces. The disabled persons in workplaces, public or private, should undergo training about their rights. Disabled persons themselves are not even knowledgeable about their own rights. When I talked with the HR department of the company I am interning at, they told me that they have a special training program and booklets to inform disabled workers of their special rights. HR employee that I spoke with also added that as disabled persons are not aware of their rights, they think some things are done for them just out of pity or as a favor to them.

Another big influence in creating a perception could be television. There are no television shows or series featuring disabled persons as a part of normal life. Indeed, television producers probably do not cast disabled persons to avoid the possibility that people could off turn off the television. In some of the Turkish movies and shows I saw, disabled people are always characterized as the ‘scar’ of the family. Disabilities are often
portrayed almost like a curse on the family. That person is always left and locked away in a room with special care. I think of the show Glee for example and remember the boy with the wheelchair who got involved in the choir. There is not a single example on Turkish television that depicts a disabled person having a normal life. If we cannot create this image even in fiction, I wonder how can we expect people to have a positive perception about disabled persons in real life.

Then, I think about Islam, which is another influencer on the Turkish society. Islam is a very compassionate religion in its core. It demands the rich to always give to the poor and help the ones in need. However, I had never heard anything specifically about how disabled persons are treated in Islam. The article “The Treatment of Handicapped People in Islam”, states that Quran hardly contains a direct reference to disabled people. The only reference to disabled people is in the context of jihad: “Not equal are those of the believers who sit (at home), except those who are disabled, and those who strive hard and fight in the Cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives” (Pervez 1). If this is really the only reference to disabilities, then it is very unfortunate. Such a powerful tool like Quran that could guide people into doing good, should include more references about disabled people. This reference is problematic itself. It segregates disabled people and states that they could sit at home rather than go and teach people about Islam. However, there are many Islamic leaders in communities that are very influential. Reaching out to the Islamic leaders in communities, who could influence their congregations and audience, might be a starting point to create a positive perception among the Islamic communities.

I think big influencers like schools, workplaces, television and religious sources in Turkey do not help in creating a positive perception for disabled people. Yet, these sources are so powerful to influence the most of the society. Government and organizations should focus on improving these four areas to develop a positive perception about disabled persons in Turkey.
III. Solutions Part II: Inclusion into Social Life, Improving City Life, Healthcare and Activities

A. Healthcare Facilities and Rehabilitation

The strategy will have two wings, one involves working with independent institutions like MDRI and the second involves working with the government. Over the last several years, many global institutions recommended that the government should take immediate action to end the dangerous conditions in healthcare and rehabilitation facilities in Turkey, highlighting that these practices constitute human rights violations such as torture or inhuman and degrading treatment. Independent organizations worked towards that goal and requested the government to ban the use of unmodified ECT in all circumstances. As a result, government made it illegal to use ECT without anesthesia and also on children. In this case the strategy will be towards campaigning towards establishing strict guidelines for ensuring that ECT is used with proper medical safeguards and with the consent of the individual subject to the treatment. Another important strategy is to further investigating if these rules are being followed and applied by these facilities. A little before 2010, RUSIHAK (The Imitative for Human Rights in Mental Health) was established and working together with RUSIHAK would be a great opportunity as most of the facilities of disabled individuals are the same facilities that treat mental health related issues. They started planning campaigns to empower trainings for staff working in these facilities and monitor them, which is one of the only ways to ensure that these facilities are being complaint with legal and health regulations of Turkey and international conventions. While trying to ensure that these facilities are proper for disabled individuals, ensuring the availability of adequate food is of utmost importance. Therefore, the first part of the strategy involves helping RUSIHAK, MDRI, independent organizations and the government to ensure that these facilities are actually making the lives and health of disabled individuals better.

In addition to ensuring that there are no human rights violations in facilities, it is at utmost importance to increase rehabilitation centers. Other than encouraging the government, a successful strategy might be to improve disabled tourism to increase the number of rehabilitation centers. With the increasing number disabled people, there is a need for more rehabilitation centers and camps like the ones in Norway and Germany.

B. Improving City Life

The second part of the strategy addresses the core of the problem, which is including disabled individuals into the society. To do so, improving the conditions of cities and transportation as well as making the city furniture accessible to the disabled people are key. In general, the aspects of creating an enabled city include houses, public areas, recreational areas and transportation. There are specific things that could be done to improve the accessibility of these 4 different types of areas to enable them for the disabled.
For residential areas, houses and public buildings, entrances, elevators, ramps and stairs should be built or redesigned according to the needs of the disabled. Regarding the entrances to the buildings, spinning doors should be avoided. In addition to accessible bathrooms, protective measures should be built inside the houses and public buildings for the disabled. To ensure these, governments should create these criteria while licensing new buildings.

To address issues related to transportation, a possible strategy would be working with the government, big car companies like Ford, and big developers, who are in need for developing corporate social responsibility projects to develop disabled friendly transportation vehicles and roads. The urban areas in Turkey such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara and Bursa lack places for disabled individuals to go and well as streets that these individuals can use. Many banks do not have accessible accommodations for disabled persons, for example ATMs are not fit for disabled persons as stated above. Gathering up with big banks in Turkey such as HSBC to change their banks and ATMs to make them disabled accessible could be another strategy that will improve their living conditions. Re-developing the streets, roads and parking spots by partnering up with companies and the government will make disabled people included into the social life and make use of public services. Other than some new subway stations in Istanbul, public transportation, including taxis are not disabled accessible either. Busses and subway stations should be converted into disabled accessible ones. Taxis and cabs are widely used in Turkey, as government taxes on private cars are very high. Taking New York as an example, Turkey can partner up with companies like Ford to convert taxis into disabled accessible ones. Ford has been developing disabled accessible taxis in New York City and they can promote this in Turkey as well. Government might require every taxi station in urban areas to include at least one disabled accessible car.
Moreover, increasing the amount of disabled accessible buses and auditing the ones that do not abide by the rules could ensure the improvement of transportation services in all of the cities in Turkey. To improve recreational areas, portable ramps are also quite important for shops and stores to carry. Maybe not all parts of the cities and not all stores are built according to the needs of the disabled, however portable ramps, which are very inexpensive and easy to purchase, should be available in shops, stores, pharmacies and offices. Big corporations could initiate and increase the usage of portable ramps. Portable ramps provide easy and quick access to people with wheelchairs.

![Disabled accessible bus in Izmir, Turkey.](image1)

![A portable ramp in an art gallery in Taksim, Istanbul](image2)

### C. Activities

A successful strategy would include involving sports organizations for integrating disabled individuals into the society. Starting with soccer, basketball, volleyball, sports take a big place of people’s lives in Turkey. They take national pride and support the sports teams that are worth billions of dollars. Recently, some of the biggest sports organizations have been promoting their disabled sports teams. Sports organizations such as Fenerbahce Sports Club, Galatasaray Sports Club and Besiktas Gymnastics Club should be included into this process. Increasing disabled sports tournaments and increasing the popularity of the existing leagues would create more respect for disabled sportsmen. These sportsmen can be the face of disabled persons in Turkey. They have been getting more and more successful even though the popularity of the tournaments is still very low. So partnering up with TV networks to reserve more space for broadcasting their performances could be a strong strategy to promote a better living for disabled individuals. Fenerbahce Sports Club’s soccer team has recently started off an international match with all soccer stars coming to the stadium with disabled children next to them, holding their hands. Similar projects to raise awareness could be a big part of the strategy.
“You can't put a limit on anything. The more you dream, the farther you get.”—Michael Phelps

Sports, indeed, is a great way help people. I believe sports rescue people. Sports can also rescue disabled people. Sports push people to be winners or at least try harder. It creates friendships and rivalries. It creates will and hope. It sounds ironic at first to consider the words disability and sports at the same sentence. However, there many areas of sports that can be done by disabled people. According to the report “Disabled People and Sports”, many sporting activities are used during the rehabilitation process of disabled people as these activities complement conventional physical therapy methods (Koca 2). In addition, they increase coordination, stability, and strength and improve muscles. Koca states that sporting activities also improve one’s self esteem and make the disabled regain their instinct to care about themselves (Koca 2). As a result, these activities help disabled people integrate into social life. Government and sports club listed above could increase their activities in areas of sports that can be done by disabled people. All of the areas of sports that can be done by disabled people are listed below:

• Weight Lifting
• Shooting
• Athletics
• Riding
• Cycling
• Soccer
• Goalball
• Fencing
• Sailing
• Judo
• Table Tennis
• Archery
• Volleyball
• Wheelchair Basketball
• Wheelchair Rugby
• Swimming
• Wheelchair Tennis

IV. Conclusion

“I want to see you.
Know your voice.

Recognize you when you
first come 'round the corner.

Sense your scent when I come
into a room you've just left.

Know the lift of your heel,
the glide of your foot.

I want to know the joy
of how you whisper more”
— Rumi

Working on this paper, I learned that far more than I expected has to be done. Far more than I knew were problematic. Disabled people are of the wounds of my society. And unfortunately, they are far less spoken about. There are improvements, which are mediocre. There are efforts that also remain unexceptional. While researching, I figured out that what matters the most is getting to know them. I want to get to know them more and more. I want to recognize them. On the other hand, I do not want to recognize them as “them”. I want to say “us”. That is why; I believe the solutions that stuck with me the most and that excited to me the most were the ones that would make them integrate into communities. From communities, come support, love and will to live. From communities, comes ambition and friendships. I hope, in the crowds I see them, on the TV I see them, in a sports arenas I see them. Long story short, I hope we become “us”.


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