

PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH

Ola Abu Alghaib



The life of Ola Abu Alghaib is an inspirational tale of triumph over adversity. Since becoming permanently disabled at a young age, she has fought tirelessly to overcome the social, political, economic, structural, and cultural barriers that face people with disabilities – especially women. Her 20-year track record in rights advocacy, academic research, and policy development clearly demonstrates what can be achieved when one is committed to one's vision and mission.

On the world stage, Ola has spoken up as the progressive voice for Palestine in regional and international debates on moving towards disability-inclusive policies. "People with disabilities must lead change, not wait for change," she explains, stressing the need for "unifying efforts between organizations for persons with disabilities" (PwDs). With her multiple degrees, and now completing a PhD in social protection for PwDs in developing countries, Alghaib has skillfully combined academic practice with activism to bring about the fundamental change she so powerfully espouses.

Born in Nablus, Ola was just 12 years old when she had to come to terms with a lifelong disability that put her in a wheelchair. Despite being a bright child, she was subsequently excluded from education, as the schools in her city did not accept students with disabilities.

Instead of giving up hope in the face of institutional discrimination, Ola continued to strive towards improving her life through the educational opportunities she believed she was entitled to. She enrolled at Talitha Kumi, a private school in Beit Jala, where she quickly established herself as a grade-A student and secured funding from Bethlehem University to cover the costly tuition fees.

In the same way, Alghaib has persisted throughout her life in knocking on every door to access the same rights and privileges as non-disabled individuals. It was only natural, then, that fighting for her own rights became a wider struggle for the empowerment of all PwDs. To that end, she has served as a trusted consultant and influencer to many governments worldwide, to advocacy groups and NGOs, working with the likes of the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization to research and analyze social and developmental policies that promote greater inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities. She has designed and implemented ambitious advocacy research projects in Palestine, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Indonesia, amongst others, and has carried out emancipatory disability research with organizations in the MENA region to develop evidence-based advocacy. With the Ministry of Health and international community organizations, she founded the first program in Palestine to support children with disability. Her record attests that she is equally comfortable engaging with the grass roots as she is with senior levels.

Today, as always, Alghaib is a force to be reckoned with. "I was born a warrior," she says, "a warrior for my rights and the rights of all women with disabilities." As a distinguished academic, seasoned traveller, passionate advocate, leader of change, and a wife and mother, Ola Abu Alghaib serves as a shining example, not only to PwDs but to all people of Palestine, of unwavering faith and determination in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. And one cannot help but feel that she is only just getting started.