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Chavia Ali, UN Volunteer Assistant Research Officer with the Regional Bureau for the Arab States of the UN Development Programme, working at home.

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From Syria to Sweden: channeling energy to uplift persons with disabilities

Chavia Ali (Syria) serves as a UN Volunteer Assistant Research Officer with the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Although she is assigned to the Regional Bureau of Arab States in New York, , due to COVID-19 Chavia has been telecommuting from Sweden, where she sought refuge several years ago. In this article, we feature Chavia's experience as a UN Volunteer with a disability serving on an assignment funded by the Government of Sweden.

Having experienced discrimination herself, Chavia has always felt the need to dedicate herself to tackling challenges faced by persons with disabilities. For as long as she can remember, volunteering has always been her passion.

During her university years at Aleppo University, Syria, Chavia founded an advocacy organization for persons with disabilities. "At the time, I was fortunate enough to have my father's support, so I was able to fully dedicate myself to improving the everyday lives of persons with disabilities in my home country," she recalls.

Her dedication didn't falter when she came to Sweden as a refugee, fleeing the war in Syria. Struggling to establish herself in a new environment, she helped fellow refugees with translations, writing job applications, and filling in unemployment and insurance forms. She also volunteered at nursing homes, where she was able to improve her Swedish language skills.

A lot of in-person volunteer work came to a halt due to COVID-19, so working remotely as a UN Volunteer for UNDP was a good way for Chavia to continue her volunteer engagement during this challenging period.

Initially, Chavia joined the Communications Office of the Regional Bureau for Arab States. However, due to challenges the region faced, she was asked to help with the portfolio dedicated to persons with disabilities, drawing from her personal and professional experience as an advocate.

She started her assignment by collecting information and interviewing focal points about the various projects country offices had for persons with disabilities. Chavia then used a mapping report to assess the adherence of the regional bureau to the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS).

Chavia is currently using this report and the UNDIS findings to craft a regional approach that she hopes will provide a blueprint for the regional bureau to improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities, both internally and in their programming. Chavia will also be facilitating a meeting of the country office focal points in order to coordinate efforts and share best practices.

“ I feel grateful and happy for the opportunity, because being a UN Volunteer has allowed me to channel my energy into useful work for people with disabilities in the region. I hope they can benefit from increased funding, employment and volunteering opportunities and that this leads to leaving less behind. --Chavia Ali, UN Volunteer Assistant Research Officer with UNDP

Like many others, Chavia is now facing challenges due to COVID-19. Clearly, there have been some unforeseen challenges in her everyday life. She is also missing the social interaction she would normally have.

Health is another problematic issue in the COVID context, not just because of the virus itself, but also due to the adverse effects of working remotely on a computer all day. Chavia believes this could pose more challenges for persons with disabilities.

She says, "Self-care is always important. I recommend keeping active and exercising as much as possible throughout the day, as we are vulnerable to further loss of function."

On the other hand, she thinks that there are also some bright sides to remote working. Indeed, for people with disabilities, she says, "remote work has eliminated the stress that comes from worrying about the accessibility of workplaces and facilities and concerns about the commute to and from work. At the same time, it is good that we are entitled to reasonable accommodation, which does facilitate matters for us."

In closing, she shares a message with those who share similar aspirations to volunteer despite their disabilities:

“ Design your life to suit your differences, because we, as persons with disabilities, have so much to share. Never feel ashamed to ask for support and don't try to be superhuman. --Chavia Ali



• International Day of Persons with Disabilities • International Day for Tolerance • Persons with disabilities • full funding programme • Sweden • COVID-19

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