



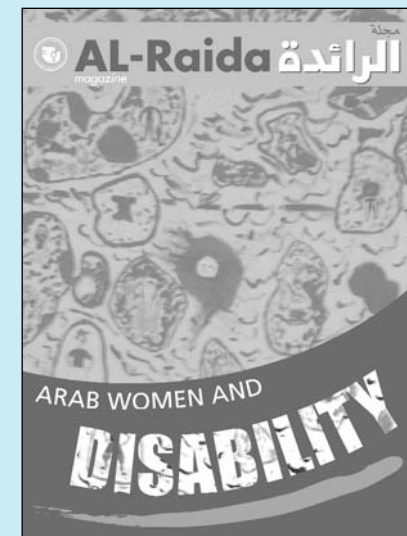
# AL-Raída <sup>مجلة</sup> الرائدة

magazine

Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University  
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ARAB WOMEN AND

**DISABILITY**



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## On Disabilities

■ Nawaf Kabbara

President of the Arab Organization of Disabled People and the National Association for the Rights of Disabled People in Lebanon  
Professor of Political Science, Balamand University

The Lebanese parliamentary election was a very decisive moment in the country's history. As a result of this election, a new parliamentary majority and discourse dominated the political scene. The election was also peculiar concerning the disability cause in Lebanon. For the first time in the history of Lebanon's elections, disability became an issue. In fact, the Lebanese disability movement succeeded in launching two different but complementary campaigns during the election. The first one was engineered by both the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union and the Youth Blind Association. Under the title "Haqqi" or "My Right," the campaign focused on the right of people with disability to practice one of their most important rights: the political right to vote. Such a right needs to have accessible polling stations, something that the Lebanese government did not contemplate in the process of the preparation of the election. According to the statistics around 30,000 adults suffer from different kinds of physical disability. Accordingly, 30,000 persons are denied the right to vote due to the lack of accessible polling stations. The campaign focused on highlighting this right and on pushing the government to respect and to implement the clauses in Law 220/2000 concerning the right to accessible polling booths.

The second campaign was launched by the Lebanese Council of Disabled People (LCDP). As a coalition of organizations of people with disability in Lebanon, LCDP decided to work on two objectives. The first was to get people with disability to use their vote as a political bargaining chip in the interest of the disability cause. Accordingly, people with disability were encouraged to negotiate a full commitment to the implementation of Law 220 with political candidates in exchange for supporting them in the elections. The second objec-

tive was to nominate people with disability to run for election. The idea was to negotiate the possibility of including disabled candidates in different election lists in different regions. According to LCDP, if people with disability are elected to parliament, they will have enough power to push for the implementation of the Law. Furthermore, the presence of persons with disability in parliament would drastically change societal and governmental attitudes towards disability. In pursuit of such an endeavor LCDP declared the candidacy of three persons with disability. As a result of negotiation, one person officially declared himself a candidate and ran for election in the second district of North Lebanon in one of the two competing lists there. By the end of the election, Nawaf Kabbara, the writer of this editorial and the LCDP candidate did not win but got around 64,000 votes. It was a very exciting and successful campaign. To begin with, people dealt with the presentation of a disabled candidate very normally. The wheelchair was not a negative issue for the voters. In addition, disability became a serious issue in the election. Finally, history has recorded that a candidate with disability has run and conducted a serious campaign helping in changing people's attitude towards disability.

The disability cause has changed quite positively in Lebanon, although the government is still behind in meeting the minimum aspirations and rights of people with disability. However, disabled people's organizations can use this positive societal attitude and the results of their election campaigns to push for the implementation of the Law and meeting the aspirations of Lebanese people with disability. Disabled people in the Arab world who are witnessing an increase in democratic practices in their countries can use the Lebanese experience to further enhance the conditions of Arab people with disability.

## What is it Like to be a Girl with Special Needs in Today's World?

■ Wali Merhej

Lecturer on Special Education at AUB  
Director of First Step Together Association for Special Education (FISTA)

Lebanese girls with special needs have to come a long way in their struggle for social justice. Psychological, physical and often sexual abuse of special needs girls is not limited to Lebanon.

The United Nations Development Program reported that the Arab region ranks among the lowest concerning human development. One of the main reasons behind the development setback is the weak participation of women. As Mona Khalaf, Head of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, says: "Women's liberation in Lebanon is an ongoing struggle between modernists and radical religious conservatives, and tribal rules are still in place in the society."

Regarding access to social protection schemes and entitlements, special education, health care and a sheltered workplace, women and girls with special needs in Lebanon still have to go a long way to reach their goals.

What kind of world are girls with special needs looking for? Our world seems preoccupied with technology, natural disasters and war. Nature and the world of the spirit seem distant. In the Arab world there is a tendency today to treat girls as models ("Haifa"- syndrome and *Star*

*Academy*) and to expect them to cope easily with so much of our shallow modern world: a variety of media, strong impressions all around, big commercial centers. The qualities of childhood – taking their time, being playful, active in space, vital and spontaneous – are less and less welcomed in the adult world of aims, efficiency, filling up time and achieving results, and the response to all of this is hyper-activity, aggression, attention-seeking, depression and other mental and health problems.

Children need to be given the space to grow up slowly, and the chance to be accepted and wanted.

"Hala" is a 34-year-old woman with special needs. Initially she appears to be a teenage-girl, waving her hands in eternal attention-seeking, mumbling: "I am good, I am really good." Hala was expected to be a boy, being the youngest sister of three girls, and thus would have carried on the name of her grandfather. At the age of one she started to have seizures, showed developmental delay and later was unable to cope in regular school. Physical punishment did not change her cognitive abilities and she was sent to an association that takes care of mentally retarded students. At 12 she was kept at home because she got her period. The Association was

unable to cope with this natural phenomenon and asked the mother to teach her daughter about hygiene. There was no explanation and understanding of Hala's situation; nobody cared for her well-being and she was seen as a problem. So she was kept at home, pushed around and beaten when she did not fulfill the demands of her family. Meanwhile the civil war was over and Hala not only suffered from health-impairment, mental retardation and behavioral disorders, but was also mentally sick. Hala is working today at an eco-management workshop taking care of small rabbits. Recovering her connection to nature helped her to feel valued again and she also learned to better value and even enjoy what she is doing.

A new circle of warmth was built around her from her peers, teachers and parents. Quality guidance was available to the parents to consider and accept Hala with her individual needs and to give her the opportunity for quiet spaces and social moments.

It is not always possible to resolve problems without difficulties, yet women with special needs should live where there is a united world around them without war and with bridges for communication and examples for constructive communities – it's like helping the 2005 tsunami victims. Women with disabilities are routinely excluded from the normal patterns of everyday life; they are still marginalized, abused, exploited and disregarded, and the message: "You are a problem" is easily given to them. On the other hand, the pendulum can swing the other way: "You are so special."

Women with special needs have to be acknowledged and to be seen in a true way, a plain way – not too little, not too much – to reach a balance. When we recognize women with special needs we should have a sense of proportion and naturalness that can leave them free.

Finding the way back to ourselves and enriching our inner lives can have a balancing effect. We need our energy to do something for girls and women with special needs on all fronts and for every human being.

They all need peace, attention, guidance, love, company, presence of mind and listening to. Special needs people today are reacting to the environment. When we explain away their behavior as due only to their being special, we may forget to look around and to take responsibility for the right changes that need to come about. Each generation and each culture is different, and when we are close to them and understand their particularity, it tells us what they need. As a result of a new awakening to girls and women with special needs in Arab countries, we can recognize and respect them while holding our place of responsibility as parents, as teachers and lawmakers. As times move on we find new questions and these call for new research. Let us create a picture for the future that takes into account a new awareness of women with special needs – a world of protection without pressure to create a counter-balance to the flow of events and think how we would like it to be for future generations.

## Forthcoming: Arab Women and Activism

### Recent Publications

- Berthoud, R., Lakey, L., and McKay, S. (1993). *The Economic Problems of Disabled People*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Morris, J., Ed. (1996). *Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability*. London: The Women's Press Ltd.
- Orgad, S. (2005). *Storytelling Online: Talking Breast Cancer on the Internet*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Zirinski, R. (2005). *Ad Hoc Arabism: Advertising, Culture, and Technology in Saudi Arabia*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

### Announcement

The Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) is proud to announce its forthcoming International Training Course on Gender, Development and Participatory Governance. We would be pleased if you could pass on this information to anyone who might benefit from the course.

The new date for this year's session is: 14 November- 2 December 2005. It will take place at KIT's training centre in Amsterdam. The course addresses a number of questions, including:

- What is gender analysis and why is a rights-based approach important in development?
- How can we enhance women's political effectiveness?
- What is the role of civil society in holding governments accountable for gender equality commitments?
- How can marginalized groups be assisted to claim citizenship and equal rights?

The course offers participants:

- Theoretical and practical knowledge of gender, development and participatory governance
- Information about, and analysis of, international instruments for achieving gender equality
- Strategic skills to ensure the prioritisation of gender equity in the development and governance agenda
- The opportunity to share relevant experiences and materials among participants from different countries

For further details on course contents, entrance requirements and registration, please visit the course website <http://www.kit.nl/development/html/gdpg.asp> or write to: [gender@kit.nl](mailto:gender@kit.nl)

### Campaign for the Visibility of Disabled Women in the UN Convention

Since 2002 the United Nation's Member States have been negotiating "A Comprehensive and Integral Convention

on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities." Although the human rights of persons with disabilities are fairly well respected in the actual draft, the gender perspective is missing nearly throughout the document. The special needs and discriminations of women with disabilities are hardly mentioned or referred to. Disabled women remain invisible so far. Therefore the organisations NETZWERK ARTIKEL 3 and Sozialverband Deutschland (SoVD) started the campaign "Towards Visibility of Disabled Women in the UN Convention!" You can support this campaign on: [www.un-disabledwomen.org](http://www.un-disabledwomen.org)

### Arab Women's Forum Website:

<http://www.awfarab.org>

### A Resource for Action in the Arab Region

ECWR's Arab Women's Forum is a network of activists and NGOs from 16 Arab countries convened by ECWR to support a region-wide Arab women's movement. The Forum provides partners with mutual support, information sharing, trainings and joint action. The AWF's website, [www.awfarab.org](http://www.awfarab.org) was launched in Dec. 2004 and is a center for information on women's political and legal status in 22 Arab countries - information that is often difficult to access but absolutely necessary to activists fighting to end the discrimination against women in their country.

## F i l m s

### *The Day I Became a Woman*

In her first feature film, Meshkini visually unfolds the stages of womanhood in a series of three vignettes. Hawa is about to turn nine, the age where she has to cover herself. She can no longer play in the streets with boys, especially her best friend Hassan. Aho is threatened with divorce by her husband, the local mullah and relatives if she doesn't stop cycling. Hoora, bound to her wheelchair, spends her inheritance on everything she could not afford in her youth.

### *Covered Girls*

The camera lens focuses on Muslim-American adolescents in New York, wearing full-length dresses and headscarves. Preconceptions about a misunderstood culture are challenged. Tavasha composes rap songs, Kiren is a basketball coach and Amnah has a black belt in Karate. Their daily experiences are documented, whether in a Brooklyn mosque or a recording studio in Harlem. After 9/11 when they were pushed, spat upon and threatened, these girls find themselves torn between religious extremism and the American dream.

"Now the time has come when society should start accepting disabled women. There are many disabled women who are capable and intelligent but are rejected by society. Why? And just because a woman is disabled, she cannot get married because the man's parents refuse to accept her as their daughter-in-law. The preposterous reason is that they adhere to the old tradition and give priority to what society would say rather than to their son's feelings about the woman." (Nafisa, <http://www.independentliving.org/docs2/daa6.pdf>)

"... a woman with a disability is unmarriageable because she is in a deformed body that society has taught her to hate. Furthermore, she draws no male attention, the way an "ordinary girl" would. These preconceptions reflect the current situation in Lebanon where people with disabilities have yet to be fully integrated into society; women, in particular, have been mostly kept in their homes by over-protective parents or relatives. Hence, having minimal chances of gaining contact with the world outside their home and minimal chances of getting married, women with disabilities are seen as sheltered and isolated women, surrendering their virginity at the first sign of male attention. Being already constructed as unmarriageable in a context that holds high disregard and minimal opportunities of integration for people with disabilities, women with disabilities are seen as having nothing to lose by consenting to sex outside marriage. Consent to sex is the only way to get male attention and affection ... In the case of women with disability, conceptions of consensual sex and rape are tied not only to the woman's individual desires for affection, but more broadly to society's disregard for people with disabilities. When she consents, she is believed to have done so because she has internalized society's disregard for her as a disabled woman. While these conceptions reflect a critical view of social relations at the intersection of disability and gender, they nonetheless reinforce oppressive social relations that define women's worth through their status as un/marriageable. In addition to rendering invisible a woman's personal desires in consenting to sex, conceptions of disabled women's sexuality have the potential of undermining women's disclosures of rape. While it may be true that some women with disabilities have learned to exchange sex for affection, what I find more interesting is that this belief in disabled women's need for affection is used to cast doubts on the credibility of dis-

abled women who disclose incidents of rape. In short, a disabled woman's credibility is undermined by virtue of her social location that has constructed her a priori as unmarriageable, and hence as unrapeable." (Samantha Wehbi, *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 295-296)

"My main objective is to be an effectively contributing member of the community at large and thus contribute to the development of my country. The problem is the negative attitude in society towards the active participation of disabled people in community development. I have to counter the belief that a disabled person is an object of pity who always needs assistance from somebody else. This problem is compounded by the fact that I am a woman. Being a disabled woman is a double disadvantage in my community." (Gloria, <http://www.independentliving.org/docs2/daa6.pdf>)

"I had polio when I was very young. My parents were told that I would never be able to walk normally again. My mother struggled so that I could have as many surgical operations as possible, but she never let me go to school. In the institutions where I was staying, all the other girls were going to school except me. My mother said it was not important for me to learn. I am now 26 years old, and totally illiterate. I learned to sew, and I have been working in sewing factories for ten years. My mother and father do not work, and my brother is unemployed. My father gave him his shop, to start his own business, but somehow he managed to lose everything. He only comes home to ask for money, which he spends on alcohol, and other things. Despite all this, my parents love and respect him and dare not confront him. I, on the other hand, am not allowed to go out except to go to work. They have forbidden me to participate in a summer camp for disabled people. They even stopped me from marrying a man that I was in love with. They said that even if I eloped, they'd find me and kill me. They could do that! I got scared and left the man I was involved with. My parents say that I am disabled and cannot marry. But that is not true. They do not want me to leave home because my salary is their only income. Sometimes I wonder why they can't love me the same way they love my brother. After all, he only brings them trouble. I am the one who looks after them. (Zeinab, *Gender and Disability: Women's experiences in the Middle East*, p.22)

## From Kuwait

### The Struggle for Women's Suffrage

(...) Although Kuwait has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the government made reservations to both treaties noting that they are inconsistent with Article 1 of its voting law, which denies women's suffrage. In March 2000, the United Nations Human Rights Committee urged the Kuwaiti Government to "take all the necessary steps to ensure to women the right to vote and to be elected on an equal footing with men, in accordance with Articles 25 and 26 of the Covenant.

The suffrage movement in Kuwait has a long history. In 1971, following a conference on women's issues in Kuwait, a bill was submitted to the National Assembly granting full political rights for women. The bill was only supported by 12 of the 60 members of the Assembly. Subsequent legislative initiatives for women's suffrage were introduced in 1981, 1986, 1992 and 1996 but political support has never been strong enough. In 1994, the Women's Issues Network (WIN), a coordinating committee for 22 non-governmental organizations, launched a Blue Ribbon Campaign in support of women's rights to vote and to stand for elected office. The campaign aims to raise public awareness about the exclusion of women in Kuwait from political participation. On 28 October 2000, a public demonstration was held in front of the National Assembly at the commencement of its fourth session, calling for the amendment of the Election Law to give women the right to vote.

Although in November 1999 the National Assembly again denied women suffrage, the 32-30 vote was the closest in Kuwait's 37-year parliamentary history. Despite the vehemence of the opposition, the movement for women's suffrage is gaining support and Kuwaiti women are hopeful that they will soon win their long-awaited political rights. In October 2000, the National Assembly reconvened. In considering the bill that was introduced in July, its members will once again have an historic opportunity to change the law so that no country in the world denies only women the right to vote.

<http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/suffrage.htm#kuwait>

## From Afghanistan

### Afghanistan's First Female Governor

Habiba Sarobi is Afghanistan's first female governor, a major advance in a society where, only four years ago under the Taliban, women were denied everything from lessons to lipstick and forced to wear the all-covering burka.

It is not a job for the faint hearted. Afghan governors are stereotypically gruff, bearded men with a penchant for fighting, sweet tea and smoke-filled-room politics. Ms. Sarobi, a mild-mannered mother, comes to work with a suitcase and her secretary.

Formerly the Minister for Women's Affairs, she said she had turned down an ambassadorial job to demand the governor's post from President Hamid Karzai. "He was surprised," she said. "His first question was, 'Do you think the people will accept you?' I said, 'Definitely, yes'." (...)

Nobody expects an overnight revolution. The obscurantist edicts of the Taliban are an unhappy memory: Afghan women can vote, work and go to school; a quarter of all seats in next September's parliamentary vote are reserved for women; in Kabul, increasing numbers are shedding their burkas. But civil rights do not necessarily mean human rights. Despite billions of dollars in aid, health and education facilities remain dire. For example, giving birth in Badakhshan province claims the life of one in every 15 mothers. This is the highest maternal mortality rate in the world. In the deeply conservative south, most women spend their lives hemmed in by high walls and overprotective men. Forced marriages and domestic violence are rife across the country. Last week a woman in Badakhshan was stoned to death for adultery, the second such killing since the Taliban's overthrow in 2001. (...)

Ms. Sarobi recently toured Europe to rally sympathetic ears and deep pockets to her cause. She needs much of both. But she will also benefit from the considerable political capital invested by President Karzai. Even the former governor, Muhammad Rahim Aliyaar, has lent his support, at least for now. "It's too early to judge whether a woman can succeed. That will take six months or a year," he said. "But I believe that most people are behind her, and so am I."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1470090,00.html>

## Photo Exhibit "Veil(s)"

May 5–12, 2005, LAU, Beirut Campus (Irwin Hall)

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World addressed the issue of the veil through a photographic overview from different parts of the world, a series of quotations from a wide array of persons belonging to different religious, social, political, educational, and cultural backgrounds, as well as personal testimonies. The purpose of the photo exhibit was to promote a better understanding of the veil and to foster a culture of tolerance. The exhibit was also displayed in the *Khan Al-Franj* in Saida from June 17–21, 2005, and this under the patronage of Mrs. Bahia Hariri and in cooperation with the National Society of Saida Festivals.



From Left to Right: LAU President Dr. Joseph Jabbra, IWSAW Director Mona Khalaf and Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Abdallah Sfeir

## Beijing + 10

February 28–March 6, 2005, New York

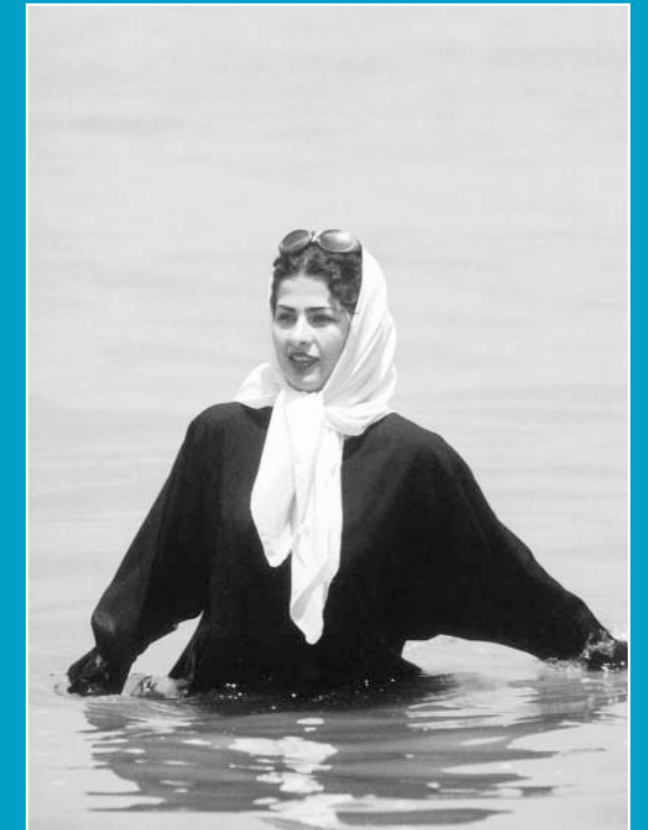
IWSAW Director, Mona Khalaf, attended the 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) that took place in New York, and during which the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (Beijing + 10) were reviewed and appraised, and participated in the high-level round table on "Innovations in Institutional Arrangements for promoting Gender Equality at the National Level" held during the session.



From Left to Right: IWSAW Director Mona Khalaf and a conference participant

## May 19–20, 2005, Belfast- Ireland

IWSAW Director, Mona Khalaf, attended a conference on "Women and Human Rights: Conflict, Transformation and Change" organized by the University of Ulster. The paper she presented tackled "The Lebanese Woman in the Post Taif Era."



## Women with Disability:

# The Peculiarity of the Case

The question of "Women with Disability" is related to two subjects simultaneously. The first deals with the issue of women's rights whilst the other deals with the problem of disability and its impact on the identity of the person with a disability. Whereas the literature has lately become quite rich in research and articles about the condition of women and the different aspects of feminist strategies, accomplishments and the empowerment of women, the question of disabled women is still rare and very underdeveloped. As far as the Arab world is concerned, most of its literature deals with disability as a medical and rehabilitation issue given the fact that these writings are being presented by professionals working in the field. Accordingly, the concern of the disability movement is to turn disability into an international political issue to be dealt with at that level. The writing of some disabled people about their struggle has succeeded in getting disability seen as a socio-political issue very much related to a question of identity and citizen's rights. In fact, disability has passed through three main phases. Phase one goes back to the Middle Ages where disability was seen as a curse. Accordingly, it was considered part of the struggle between the forces of "Good and Evil" with disability being either the work of the devil or a symbol of God's punishment, treating disabled people at that time was based on religious rituals and myths. Foucault states that disabled people were confined to general hospitals alongside mad persons, the unemployed and all groups of people considered a threat by society.<sup>1</sup>

The advancement of science in general and of medical science in particular starting in the seventeenth century introduced a paradigmatic shift in dealing with disability. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the old religious paradigm on disability col-

lapsed to be replaced by a new one considering disability as a medical case to be treated by professionals. As a result, professional institutions were built and control over disabled people moved into the hands of doctors and the people in charge of these institutions. The end results were the continual alienation of disabled people as human beings.

The development of the civil rights movement in the United States by the middle of the sixties pushed towards a new model on disability. Disabled people are no longer seen as a medical or care related case but a social issue that fits within the human rights framework. The Vietnam War helped in the formation of a strong lobby of disabled people inside the United States and this movement succeeded in liberating disability from institutional control and locating it within the civil rights approach. Disability had become a social concern. By definition disability was no longer the product of a medical case but a social issue related to the degree of social acceptance of disability as a difference. What was needed was not the search for cures to different types of disability that may never succeed, but to alter social attitudes towards disability to accommodate people with disabilities as part of the social fabric of society. This paradigmatic shift started to be promoted worldwide by the middle of the seventies. National and international organizations of people with disability were formed. The most important of these are Disabled Peoples International, the World Union of the Blind and the World Union of the Deaf. Conferences, conventions and seminars started to focus on the issue as such and this process culminated in the adoption of the United Nations World Council of the International Charter on Disability Rights in 1975 and the World Program of Action in 1983. Furthermore, scholars with disabilities were successful in publishing research works and analyses on the subject mainly in the United States and Britain. One can mention in particular the efforts of Mike Oliver of Kent

University who is the first Professor of Disability Studies in Britain, and Jane Campbell a disability activist.

No doubt women with a disability face the same discrimination syndrome as disabled people in general. However, such women differ in two main areas. First, disabled women – among women in general – are most vulnerable in terms of being the victims of rape and sexual abuse. Related to the above and due to the common social attitude towards women, the second aspect of peculiarity is the fact that women with a disability are the victims of deprivation in rural and conservative societies. Accordingly, they are the most uneducated and unemployed within the disability movement. However, until the nineties the special concerns of women with disabilities were pursued neither by the feminist movement nor the disability movement. The two most important events that pushed the issue were the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 and the Washington Conference on the subject of women with disability in 1997. Some publications began to appear on the subject including Esther Boylan's book: *Women and Disability*, Susan Epstein: *We Can Make It, Stories of Disabled Women in Developing Countries*. And maybe the most important is the book by Danuta M. Krotoski, Margaret A. Nosek, and Margaret A. Turk: *Women with Physical Disability*. These books are a combination of both analytical articles on different aspects of the double discrimination that a woman with disability suffers from or a personal account of the experiences of women with disability in different areas of the world. What is common about the issue of women with disability is that the differentiation between disability and gender did not materialize. Women with disability at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 were lobbying to introduce disability as one of the cases that should be included in the declaration. What was interesting is the lack of concern within the feminist movement to introduce the case of women with disability as an essential

part of the struggle for the equalization of rights at the gender level. Women with disability were not seen as women with double discrimination but as disabled persons. Accordingly, their case fits within the rights of people with disability regardless of the peculiarity of the case of disabled women. One cannot claim today that things have changed drastically in recognizing the case of women with disability as an independent or peculiar case within the disability cause.

As far as the Arab world is concerned, the issue of disability started to witness a major shift at the beginning of the new century. With the exception of Lebanon, where disability started to be seen as a social and human rights issue by the end of the 1980s, most of the Arab world started to adopt the social paradigm by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Before this period, disability was considered as a care case in the Arab world. Most disability related policies at both the governmental and societal levels were directed towards strengthening the power of the institutions at the expense of policies directed towards the inclusion of people with disability in the society. In fact, disabled people were not included in the making of decisions concerning disability policies in their society. Organizations of people with disability were almost non-existent in most Arab countries. The change became evident by the end of the twentieth century. Two reasons may be attributed to such a shift. The first was the increasing pressure from the UN and international agencies and NGOs to push towards the adoption of the rights-based approach to disability. The second was that disabled people succeeded in organizing themselves regionally in the Arab Organization of Disabled People and pushing Arab governments to adopt 2004-2013 as the Arab Decade of Disabled People, which is basically a rights-

based approach document and an integrative plan of action for people with disability. What is interesting about the decade and is not found in other decades documents worldwide is the inclusion of women with disability as one of its 11 axes. Such an inclusion asserts an Arab position of considering the issue of women with disability as an important and peculiar case within the disability cause.

In reviewing the literature on the subject of disability in the Arab world one can clearly witness the poverty of the intellectual production in the field. Most writings tackle specific issues of a medical and general nature and are done by non-disabled people and professionals. However, the international trend coupled with the lobbying efforts of some disabled people's organizations in the region have led to the introduction of the discourse of rights and integration within the social discourse and new literature on disability in the Arab world. The literature on such kinds of activities is mainly found in the publications of the National Association for the Rights of Disabled People in Lebanon (NARD), such as the "Echo of Disabled People" magazine, the booklet on the question of religion and disability, the published details of the Conference on Independent Living held in Beirut in 1995 in addition to the translation of Oxfam's Peter Coleridge's book: *Disability, Liberation and Development*.

The question of women with disability in the Arab world began to be highlighted by the beginning of the nineties. NARD and its magazine were probably the first to give this question some importance. Accounts of personal experiences were published; furthermore, NARD organized a series of working sessions in 1996 and 1997 on the issue. In addition, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held a special seminar on the

subject in Amman, Jordan in 1994. Another similar one dealing with the problems of blind women was organized in the region in 1995 by the World Union of the Blind. By the beginning of the twenty-first century two new books dealing with the issue of women with disability were published. The first one, *Gender and Disability*, edited by Lina Abu-Habib in both Arabic and English and published by Oxfam in the year 2000, tackles the life experiences of a number of women with disability in the Arab world. The second book is written by Jahda Abou Khalil in Arabic and published by NARD in 2002 under the title: *Women who Crossed the Barriers: the Experience of 21 Women with Disability in the Arab World*. These two books were the first two documents to deal directly with the issue of women with disability in the Arab world. However, the issue is still in its infancy and has not yet formed its peculiarity within the disability movement as a case and discourse.

It is the objective of this issue of *Al-Raida* to highlight the case of women with disability in the Arab world. The issue covers many aspects of the subject. It includes the testimonies of a number of women with disability representing the different categories of disability and from different Arab countries. It also tackles some specific subjects such as employment and women with disability and disability situations in some of the Arab countries. The most important thing is that this issue is the first to deal with the subject as a case on its own.

*Nawaf Kabbara*

#### END NOTES

See Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961.



# Women with Disabilities in Lebanon

## ■ Jahda Abou Khalil

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General Director, Arab Organization of Disabled People

Disability is a twofold problem for women round the world. This is particularly true for women with disabilities in a developing country like Lebanon, where cultural norms and social traditions keep them isolated and marginalized most of the time.

However, women with disabilities in Lebanon have benefited – though in a limited manner – from programs for rehabilitation, the work of some institutions and the care of disabled people's organizations.

When writing any paper on women with disabilities in Lebanon, one has to admit that some observations have to be impressionistic. Disabled people are often subject to negligence, isolation and discrimination. Women suffer in that respect more than men. Testimonies offered by women with disabilities of different forms indicate clearly that they are deprived of education, proper health care and even of family support. A number of special educators declare that Lebanese families used to prefer sending their disabled male children to schools, especially schools for the deaf and the blind. This may still be the trend, particularly with the rapid deterioration of economic conditions at present.

Another factor determining the nature of studies on disability is the issuance and holding of disability cards. While experts and disabled people's organizations argue that the number of people with disabilities in Lebanon is no less than 100,000, the number of registered holders of disability cards has so far reached 47,065 with only 17,347 women, making up 36.86% of the total. Such a contradiction implies that a huge number of disabled people are not coming forward to register themselves as disabled<sup>1</sup>. This may be due to different reasons, but it is almost certain that women with disabilities are liable to be kept away from the registration process more than men with disabilities. Therefore, it is difficult to come up with credible conclusions about the exact status of those women<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, a number of women with disabilities in Lebanon have become prominent figures in their community. These women have been schooled and have received university degrees. A few of them hold stable jobs. And fewer still lead almost normal lives by getting married and raising their families while working.

### **Disabled Women and Education**

As for the educational level, one can assume that people

with disabilities in Lebanon are relatively poorly educated. Disabled women seem not to be as discriminated against today as they were in the past. However, they still have very limited access to schooling: 8945 disabled women declared that they never attended school, and only 5012 had elementary schooling. This means that more than half the disabled women lack education, while 80.46% are almost illiterate. Joining mainstream schools is not prevalent, though the law on the rights of disabled people encourages it. The capacity of specialized institutions is inadequate; and one has reservations concerning their services and quality of schooling.

Perhaps schools for the deaf and blind offer the most reliable statistics as regards the educational level of their female graduates. But it is almost impossible to gain accurate figures about the number of students who have been – and still are going – through their systems. Depending on the rough statistics of those institutions, it appears that the total number of disabled people who have been receiving education is not big. Historically, the number of disabled female students has been smaller – and sometimes sharply so – than their male counterparts. Although awareness-raising campaigns, especially those carried out by disabled people's organizations in the last two decades, have helped raise the number of schooled disabled women, the gap has not been tightly closed.

Many school masters agree that a limited number of women with disability have gone beyond the intermediate level of schooling, a fact underlined by the declaration of 1832 registered

female disability card holders that they had finished the intermediate stage of education. Minimal numbers have finished secondary school or joined university: 995 and 478 respectively. A great majority of disabled women, who joined specialized school, started their intermediate years without completing them, or have completed the elementary stage or part of it.

Because of the lack of mainstreaming so far, it will be difficult to improve the educational level of women with disabilities even though they seem to be willing to make use of any opportunities available to develop their skills, as is clear from some of their testimonies. However, one has to be quick to clarify an important issue: The figures released by the Ministry of Social Affairs about the num-

ber of educated women with disabilities and their levels of schooling are accurate but not valid. In order to have a disability card issued, a person has to indicate whether he/she is literate or illiterate, and to specify their educational level. Sometimes, people tend to exaggerate or minimize their achievements in this respect, particularly when many card applicants are under wrong impressions about its use and benefits.

In 1995 the Lebanese government decided to turn state daily wage earners who have disabilities into permanent salaried employees. Therefore, it assigned a committee the task of assessing those workers so as to get them onto its staff. Members of the committee agreed that a fairly large number of the people considered showed basic skills far below their assumed educational levels. This may be due to those people having lost a great deal of their potential. They may also have been educated in mainstream schools where they would have passed their examinations quite easily because their teachers and school administrators did not apply high standards to these individuals, who are very few and seem liable to pity.

#### **Disabled Women and Health**

In theory, women with disabilities should have equal access to health services. The Lebanese Ministry of Health covers 85% of the cost of hospitalization for patients admitted to hospitals that have contracts with the Ministry as regards this service. However, one may assume that families may not give high priority to providing their disabled girls with health services, simply because a number of household heads believe that disability is a medical problem, and that any other health problem is not in need of immediate treatment. Others may prefer to save the limited resources for needs other than those of the health of disabled females.

The disability card issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs allows its holder to receive health services completely free of charge, but there are certain bureaucratic procedures that need to be followed and they are somewhat complicated and longwinded. Moreover, holders of the card may not benefit from it in the proper manner if they are recipients of coverage by different health and social insurance agencies, such as the social security funds, health services of the armed forces and internal security or police force, and government employee cooperation, etc... It is a difficult issue that needs to be resolved so as to benefit fully from the health services provided by the disability card.

At a practical level, it is difficult to determine accurately the health status of women with disabilities in Lebanon. Some of the aide provided by the Ministry of Social

Affairs to disabled people may help relieve a minor part of their health problems, as in the case of pads, urine bags and perhaps special cushions which help avoid sores. So far, however, this service has been limited and not as regular as it should be because of the lack of funds.

It is not easy to draw an accurate picture of how disabled women make use of the aforementioned benefits and services, although sources at the Ministry of Social Affairs assert that a fairly big number of disability card holders – including many female holders – benefit considerably from the health services. However, certain severe cases of health problems may not be covered – even partially – by the disability card.

So disability is not a medical issue. More than 90% of the registered card holders enjoy moderate to good health conditions. This means that they almost follow a similar pattern to non-disabled citizens. Nevertheless, the cases in need of special aide – the medical ones in particular – have to be provided for free, whereby the health status of many disabled women will get enhanced.

#### **Disabled Women and Employment**

Unemployment is the common situation among disabled people in Lebanon, and it is more so among disabled women. It is noticeable that certain jobs have been assigned to the visually impaired and blind during the last three decades – switchboard operators, X-ray film developers and surgery room sterilizing workers. The physically disabled seem to have a wider scope of job opportunities, but one rarely meets physically handicapped employees in the majority of government departments. Private sector employers express many reservations as regards employing disabled persons. Nevertheless, a number of physically and visually disabled people seem to have jobs in banks and plants.

Although the government and private sectors do not respect the legally specified 3% quota, one may easily point out a number of cases where disabled people occupy some good positions, or are active in different professions. The number of women with disabilities in this group is relatively small.

Disabled women are prominent as workers in disabled people's organizations. Some of them join special schools for the different kinds of disability, a number of them work in private sector companies where they hold some clerical or secretarial jobs, at least one is known to have worked in public relations in a foreign embassy and another woman is a lecturer at one of Beirut's universities. Many women with disabilities have the courage and

patience to initiate their own work and become self-employed. Their entrepreneurial skills serve them well in the majority of cases: they provide for themselves, and sometimes for their parents; some may even lead independent lives, or have the chance to get married and start their own families.

The few scores of working women with disabilities testify to the ability and creativity of the members of this group. However, the small number shows the formidable obstacles they encounter and that prevent them from joining the labor market. Vocational rehabilitation is probably a determining limitation to the successful employment of disabled people in general, and disabled women in particular.

However, it is by no means the major hindrance. Many well-trained – and sometimes highly-educated – women with disabilities have no way to hold any post. They are kept at home in almost total isolation and have no means of getting out into the labor market, either because of family opposition or because of the lack of suitable job opportunities, or both. A number of other factors may come into play.

Economic integration is an arduous struggle, if not an impossible mission, for disabled women. The number of self-declared workers is extremely small: 837. This accounts for less than 5% of the total. It is difficult to imagine how things might improve when a few tens of job applications submitted by women with disabilities to the National Institute for Employment, are sorted out properly and responded to favorably. With the hard economic circumstances in Lebanon it seems unlikely to expect a breakthrough as regards the employment or self-employment of women with disability.

The public sector so far does not show any respect for the assigned minimum 3% quota of its jobs going to people with disability. Likewise, the private sector does not carry out its obligations as regards allocating 3% of its posts to the disabled. Even though the Employment Allowance Decree might be put into effect in the year 2005, its impact will not be palpable soon. In the meantime, if the program of income generating projects comes into effect soon it will help disabled people to

*Unemployment is the common situation among disabled people in Lebanon, and it is more so among disabled women.*

start their own businesses and employ themselves as well as others. However, vocational training and rehabilitation are necessary and have to be upgraded to keep pace with the developments of the labor market.

Disability Card Holders in Lebanon	Number	Percentage
Total	47065	100
Female cardholders:	17347	36.86

Distribution According to Age	Number	Percentage
Under 5 years	879	5.07
6 to 18 years	3855	22.22
19 to 34 years	3907	22.52
35 to 65 years	5361	30.90
Over 65 years	3345	10.28

Distribution According to Disability	Number	Percentage
Visual	1352	7.79
Physical	9831	56.67
Hearing	2135	12.31
Mental	5744	33.11

Note: The total number according to disability is 19062, because a fairly large number have multiple disabilities.

Distribution According to Educational Level*	Number	Percentage
Never attended school	8945	51.57
Elementary	5012	28.89
Intermediate	1832	10.56
Secondary	995	5.74
University (no degree)	245	1.41
University (with degree)	224	1.29
No declaration	94	0.54

\*According to their own declaration.

Number of Female Workers*	Number	Percentage
	837	4.83

Distribution According to Health Status	Number	Percentage
Good	10496	60.51
Moderate	5332	30.77
Bad	1420	8.19
Unspecified	99	0.57

\*According to their own declaration.

## END NOTES

1. The information used for basic analysis in this article is based on statistics gathered by the Ministry of Social Affairs in February 2004 in the process of issuing personal disability cards. As the data are not the result of a comprehensive survey they must not be considered scientifically representative of the reality of disabled people in Lebanon.
2. Disabled people who satisfy the conditions for disability category specified by the Ministry of Social Affairs are issued with a personal disability card on application.

# The Disabled Woman in Syria

■ Najah Diab Al-Awabida

Activist, Disability Rights, Syria

The problem of those with special needs is not a matter of pity and charity, but a matter of rights stipulated by the monotheistic religions, ratified by international organizations and included in national constitutions. The problem is now raised in order to insist on the disabled people's rights to lead a normal life just like any person whose life cannot be complete unless he/she enjoys those rights, such as security, equality, work and equal chances, so that every individual will be able to have his/her place and enjoy a secure and settled life.

The United Nations estimates the number of disabled people to be 10% of the population; i.e. that the number of disabled people in the world is now 600 million, although this percentage varies greatly from one country to another. Probably the most important reasons for this difference are wars and the degree of backwardness. Poor countries and those that suffer from recurring wars have a greater percentage of disability. Thus 492 million disabled people are in the developing countries; yet we also find a high percentage of disabled people in some of the developed countries. This is not due to a high number of disabled persons, but due to the fact that their definition of disability includes other groups, such as those with faulty kidneys and diabetes. Although all religions

have stipulated that the care of the disabled and the weak, to protect and help them, and consider helping and supporting them is a form of prayer, we find that marginalizing and neglecting them is the rule, and caring for them does not go beyond giving them alms and gifts in the event of a feast or a religious occasion. If this is the case with disabled persons in general, we find that women are even more affected.

Women in general, and disabled women in particular, suffered – and until recently – continued to suffer from a double disability due to ignorance, backwardness and the primitiveness of the infrastructure. Up to the Second World War very rarely was a man seen pushing a disabled woman in a wheelchair in public places. Families did not even admit they had a disabled woman in their midst for fear of this being a possible barrier to the marriage of her sisters and brothers. And lucky were those who were taken to a doctor. The number of disabled women who traveled to Europe or even to Istanbul for medical treatment is very small.

This all means not going to school and, as a result, illiteracy, unemployment, backwardness, introversion, staying in one room with only the family, and especially the

mother, doing their duty towards the disabled person, this duty being restricted to supplying food and clothing. Thus all social activities are non-existent. The woman who could impose herself was the one who had been able to learn knitting; reading and writing she would learn from her brothers who used to read and write in her presence. Exceptional cases such as a disabled woman entering university were thanks to her family who loved education and knowledge and insisted on her learning and spent dearly to ensure this.

This was the case until the middle of the last century, i.e. after the Second World War, when official and family attitudes toward the disabled persons changed radically. Large numbers of young men in the countries that had participated in the war had been obliged to quit the factories in which they had been working in order to join the war, and there was a dire need for workers. The solution was found by employing the women and the disabled. Thus those workers imposed themselves and people acknowledged their merit, and regarded the soldiers who had been wounded in the war as national heroes. Therefore many unions, societies and associations caring for the disabled persons were created, calling for treating them as equals to the rest of the citizens, helping them and facilitating their lives. The governments also issued many laws protecting the disabled persons and encouraging their integration into society.

Such ideas about integration started to reach the Arab countries from various sources. The media, disabled persons, their families and many responsible people started calling for equal rights for the disabled persons and for guaranteeing them a respectable life. As a result the state established specialized schools for the disabled persons, model institutions to teach the blind, and rehabilitation centers. The societies and institutions followed suit, thus many opportunities became available to all the disabled persons to learn and receive professional training.

The last three decades have witnessed great changes in the way people understand disability, and numerous conferences, symposiums and workshops were organized to clarify the term *disability*, to encourage the governments and the people to help the disabled persons, explain their potential, and propel the governments to issue laws that facilitate their integration into society.

This is what prompted us to show the present situation of disabled women in Syria:

According to July 2004 statistics the Syrian population is 17,793,000, of whom 51.09% are male, which indicates that the number of women in Syria is 8,702,557. If we

take into consideration the United Nations' estimate the number of disabled women in Syria would be 870,255.

#### The Law

Although Syrian law states that all citizens are equal, and does not differentiate between normal and disabled citizens, president Bashar Al-Assad issued Law Number 34 on 18th July 2004 pertaining to disabled persons, and containing the special definitions of the disability, the parties concerned, the services offered them in health, education, higher learning, sports, rehabilitation, work, appropriate environment, media, awareness, exemptions and services. This law respects the disabled persons in Syria and its implementation will enable the disabled persons to overcome many of the obstacles they face in the different realms of life.

#### Education

Education in Syria is obligatory and free until the end of the elementary level (the third preparatory class). In spite of this many disabled girls never go to school.

The percentage of the illiterate among those over ten is 15%, which means that the number of disabled girls who have not been to school is more than 130,538, and it is estimated that the number of illiterate disabled females surpasses this number by far, since many of them had been unable to go to school because of their poverty, or their inability to reach a school due to their disability or the distance to the school, or the absence of architectural facilities. Table 1 below shows the number of students in the Amal School for the Physically Disabled, according to the school registers.

**Table 1: Number of students in the Amal School for the Physically Disabled, according to the school registers**

Year	Males	Females	Total
1989-1990	153	59	212
1990-1991	144	54	198
1991-1992	144	60	204
1992-1993	151	81	232
1993-1994	216	130	346
1994-1995	145	88	233
1995-1996	144	73	217
1996-1997	161	88	249
1997-1998	175	81	256
1998-1999	86	54	140
1999-2000	92	46	138
2000-2001	101	49	150
2001-2002	82	41	123
2002-2003	82	41	123
2003-2004	83	50	133

**Table 2: The number of students in the Amal School for the Deaf and Dumb between 1993-2004, according to the school register**

Year	Males	Females	Total
1993-1994	241	151	392
1994-1995	237	166	403
1995-1996	248	158	248
1996-1997	260	188	448
1997-1998	231	171	402
1998-1999	234	190	424
1999-2000	224	190	414
2000-2001	269	223	492
2001-2002	283	259	542
2002-2003	266	250	516
2003-2004	203	203	?

It is clear from Tables 1 and 2 that girls with a hearing disability who had attended the school were more numerous than those with physical disability. This shows it is easier for them to get there. Although the figures do not show an increase in numbers this does not mean that their numbers decreased, for the state opened other schools in other provinces. In 2002 the Ministry of Education also started an ambitious program aiming at teaching disabled pupils in regular schools and launched this experiment in a number of schools in Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. The experiment is expected to spread out in order to include the biggest possible number of disabled students.

Families today are insisting on teaching their daughters for practical reasons. Parents have started realizing the importance of education since an educated girl has a much better chance of finding work than an uneducated one. Besides, some social reasons have arisen that have encouraged sending the girls to school. The family is no longer well-knit, and the father no longer sure that his daughter will be well looked after, for his family might disperse and his disabled daughter's future be unknown, therefore, it is mandatory to have her educated. This is why the parents insist on teaching their disabled daughter before the others, and are adamant about ensuring her life, existence and stability.

#### Sports and Entertainment

The Union of Sports for the Disabled began its activities in the mid-1980s. From the start women took part in the sports and won several championships in a variety of games, but their best achievement was in table tennis and weight lifting in which some of the players won the Arab and West Asian championships, and the Special Olympic players won several medals in regional and world championships.

The disabled woman tries to have several hobbies and to participate in social activities, but the financial factor is the main problem. Had she had a constant and fixed income she would have been able to participate in most of the activities, but in its absence she can only take part in what is important.

#### Habilitation and Work

For a disabled woman to work she must have either a scientific or a technical diploma. Therefore she is directed towards a school, as we have seen, or towards vocational training; that is, either towards centers for special training or towards the Center for the Vocational Habilitation of the Disabled. An increasing number of disabled girls have graduated from this Center due to the great demand for it.

**Table 3: The number of students in the Center for the Vocational Habilitation of the Disabled and the number of trained girls:**

Year	Males	Females	Total
1990-1991	49	23	72
1991-1992	51	25	76
1992-1993	45	20	65
1993-1994	57	25	82
1994-1995	41	23	64
1995-1996	42	15	57
1996-1997	53	19	72
1997-1998	51	22	73
1998-1999	50	20	70
1999-2000	70	34	114
2000-2001	102	52	154

Source: Yehia Afrikhar, *Vocational Rehabilitation for those with Special Needs*, p.113.

Table 3 shows that the number of those attending the Center is increasing steadily, especially the number of girls.

Regarding work, the old law permitted the ministries, institutions and companies to have 4% of their workforce disabled people, and a great number of disabled women benefited from this law. They worked in ministries and companies and especially in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor which attracted a large number of disabled females. The basic law which was issued towards the end of 2004 concerning those employed by the government stipulated that disabled employees should not be less than 4% and asked the ministries, institutions and companies to abide by this law. This meant reopening the door to more disabled people to work in the government. Then, too, the law mentioned above concerning caring for and habilitating the disabled persons offered the private sector many incentives to

encourage them to employ disabled people, such as exempting them from part of their taxes. This meant that the private sector would open its doors to the disabled persons.

Among disabled women today we find university professors, doctors, writers, lawyers, teachers, poets, novelists, employees in both the public and private sectors, as well as gifted artists and artisans who have produced many beautiful artistic objects. Disabled women will soon be occupying new posts.

In conclusion, the disabled woman in Syria has come a long way, and has passed through several important stages, some of them thanks to her will power, and others thanks to the help of her family and non-governmental organizations. But the longest way was and will be thanks to the decrees that were and still will be issued by the specialists in power. We will find the disabled woman enjoying a normal life, going to school with other disabled and non-disabled children, working in institutions with other disabled and non-disabled people, and thus participating with the other citizens in the social, economic and scientific development of this country.

## “Veil(s)”



The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), Lebanese American University (LAU) recently published a catalogue entitled "Veil(s)." The catalogue serves as a photographic overview of veiled women and includes sixty-nine photos depicting various modes of veiling among Christian, Druze, Jewish, and Muslim women. It also includes a series of quotations from a wide array of persons belonging to different religious, social, political, educational, and cultural backgrounds, as well as personal testimonies.

For those interested in ordering the catalogue kindly contact IWSAW by fax: 009611791645 or by email: [iwsaw@lau.edu.lb](mailto:iwsaw@lau.edu.lb).

The catalogue costs \$10 excluding postage charges.

# Women with Disability and Employment in Egypt

■ Heba Hagrass

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In everyday life employment is the most crucial issue to human lives. As Baron et al. (1998) has quoted Willis in saying:

"Properly to understand unemployment, we need to understand what is missing – the wage. The wage is not simply an amount of money... it is the only connection with other social possibilities, processes and desirable things. As such it operates as a crucial pivot for several other processes, social and cultural transmissions quite unlike itself." (Willis cited in Shakespeare, Ed., 1998, p.95).

Like everyone else persons with disabilities are in need of work because work gives status and value to the person. Work provides economic security and independence. Most of all work gives purpose to life (ILO 1995). It is a way to properly integrate men and women with disabilities and make them participate in social activities, which results in their better acceptance in the community and society (Hagrass 1998).

In reality people with disabilities are greatly suffering from being unable to gain their livelihoods from proper employment and are typically forced to depend on

their families or relatives or to resort to begging to meet their financial needs. In April 2000, the employment issue of people with disability took top priority in parliamentary debates. A number of members of parliament received letters from families of people with disability who had committed suicide because they had been waiting for employment for more than ten years.<sup>1</sup> These debates revealed the astonishing lapse of the government in failing to monitor the employment of people with disability in accordance with the 5% quota in the public and private sectors as stipulated in Law 39 of 1975. There is a sizeable number of persons with disability in need of employment. Indeed, they are among the most marginalized groups in the labor market. Only 500 persons with disability gained employ-

*There is a sizeable number of persons with disability in need of employment.*

ment in the year 2000 out of 12,000 in need of work<sup>2</sup>. The number of women with disabilities in need of employment in these figures is expected to be higher as will be revealed later.

In Egypt, people with disabilities face tremendous difficulties in getting employed in the open labor market. A very limited number manage to attain employment and fewer manage to sustain it<sup>3</sup>. This paper is intended to investigate the situation of women with disability and employment: and the reasons for their being regarded as undesirable employment candidates. Another major objective of this paper is to suggest ways to improve the employability of women with disabilities as a political, civil and social right.

The issue at hand cannot be divorced from the major unemployment problem from which Egypt has long suffered (Abdel-Khalek 2002; Fergany 2002). According to the Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC), the unemployment rate for the year 2001 is 9.1%<sup>4</sup>. Other figures given by the CIA (American Central Intelligence Agency) estimate the unemployment rate in Egypt at 12% for the year 2001<sup>5</sup>. From the wide discrepancy

between both figures, one can see that the state is trying to conceal part of the unemployment problem although 9% is not a small figure in itself. Hence, the unemployment of persons with disabilities is part of this problem. Needless to say, to deal with a part means to deal with the whole unemployment problem. However, for the purpose of this paper our discussion will be limited to the situation of people with disabilities – particularly women with disability – in employment.

#### Social Attitudes Towards People with Disabilities

The major problems facing people with disabilities are related to social attitudes which affect many of the social activities people with disability need to take part in. According to my MA research several women participants complained about the following attitudes and prejudices which are affecting their proper integration into society and leading to their exclusion from mainstream society with all its activities.

Through the accounts of several participants, one can see vividly what Murphy calls “the invisibility of the people with disabilities.” As Murphy puts it:

there is deep and uneasy ambivalence in relations between the able-bodied and the disabled... people look [at] the disabled as an “alien species”, they cannot anticipate his/her reactions; the disabled individual falls outside the hem of normal expectations, and the able-bodied are left not knowing what to say to him or her. One way out of the dilemma is to refrain from establishing any contact at all. (1990:166)

Furthermore, Oliver and Shakespeare state that these anxieties result in the exclusion of the person with a disability from their social surrounding. (Oliver 1990; Shakespeare et al. 1996).

Another aspect of these negative social attitudes is that people with disabilities are stigmatized because of their disability. Stigma refers to an attribute or attributes that are deeply discrediting (Goffman 1963). Stigma includes people surrounding the stigmatized person, therefore, the husband of a woman with disabilities, the daughter of a criminal, the parents of a mentally retarded person, the friend of a blind person are all sharing the stigma of this person but to different degrees. As Goffman puts it, stigma spreads “in waves but of diminishing intensity” (1963; Susman 1994). Thus stigma is a perception generated in a social encounter which differentiates between two persons on the basis of their ability or disability (Goffman 1963). Such a perception may result in the encapsulation of a person with a disability by his parents to avoid feelings of shame and stigma (Goffman 1963). Thus the feelings of the person with a disability and his/her needs are not considered in this case which leads to his/her feelings of inferiority, humiliation, unworthiness and vulnerability.

The apparent physical deviation from the ideals of beauty makes women with disabilities undesirable. People in almost all societies and cultures have been affected by the standards of beauty recently set by the West. Even clothing and other adornments have become more connected to one's social identity especially for women (Scheper-Hughes 1984; Al-Sabbah 1984; Simon 1988; Walther 1993). Marwa has been given a job in a pharmaceutical company, under Law 39 which mandates employing 5% of people with disabilities in any organization of more than 50 employees (El Banna 1989; Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs 1987). When she went to work for the first few weeks her boss kept assigning difficult tasks to her to prove that she is not fit to work. But when Marwa insisted on going to work he asked her to stay at home and he would give her her salary every month without going to work. Marwa explains that by saying: “he does not like my looks.” As a result, Marwa decided to accept his offer and “get rid

of his face” as she said and at the same time go and work among her people in the sheltered workshop at Al Nour Wa El-Amal Institute.

The unblemished look of the women is so important that many of my participants report hearing such comments as “the beautiful is never complete,” and “what a waste.”

Amal L. and her sightless sister are a good example of the family fear of social shame of having a child with a disability as well as the fear the parents have of the thought that their child with disability could suffer from sexual abuse. The two girls were denied any sort of education because education for the sightless was in a boarding school, which her parents refused as they were Upper Egyptians (Sa'ida). They were afraid someone would take advantage of them because they were sightless. After her two brothers married and her two sighted sisters married, and the death of her parents, Amal L. recalls staying at home doing housework. She said: “the lives of my sisters changed, every few days they had an event or something happened, but I was there with nothing changing.” So she decided that she wanted to go to the Institute. She asked for her doctor's help. The doctor tried to convince her family but in vain. They were afraid people would find it shameful to send her away after her parents' death. However, after long negotiations, they agreed to let her go. Amal L. believes that she never could have made it to the Institute if her parents were still alive.

All these items and ideals became the passport for success, social integration, and economic achievement (Murphy 1990). Where employment is involved, many companies and organizations consider physical appearance a requirement either explicitly or implicitly. When it comes to hiring women, beauty is considered an important asset (Murphy 1995). As a result, many companies refrain from hiring people with disabilities especially in positions dealing with customers or with the public for fear of offending their clients by the physical appearance of the person with disability.

Thus the separation of women with disabilities from the mainstream of social life also results in their inability to perform natural social relationships with the rest of the community. This leads to their exclusion from main social arenas leading to their deprivation from social institutions such as marriage. This widens the gap between people with disabilities and their society and obstructs their social integration.

#### Employment as a Constitutional Right

To be able to investigate the effects of impairment and its

disabling conditions on the employment of people with disabilities, they must be viewed within their broader structure in which they operate and acquire their meanings. It is worth emphasizing that elements operate within specific social, political and economic systems or structures, which gives them their meanings, functions and roles.

Employment is the main concern of the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). It is a political right to all Egyptian citizens, as stated in Article 13 of the Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt (Edition 8 1999:3), which states:

Work is a right, a duty and an honor that the state guarantees... (Trans. is mine).

Therefore, MOM is also responsible for the employment of all individuals with disabilities in Egypt. According to the Rehabilitation Law 39 for the year 1975 and its amendment:

All private employers who employ 50 employees or more and fall under Legislation no. 137 of year 1981 for employment, whether they operate in one area or one country or in dispersed places, are required to employ disabled persons nominated to them by Manpower offices according to their registers. This is done according to 5% of the number of employees working in that unit. This rule applies to all branches of the company. However, employers can fill the quota without the nomination of the Manpower Office on one condition, which is to register their disabled employees in the

Manpower Office register. In all cases, any firm which employs a disabled person must send a notification letter to their specified Manpower Office (art. 9). A 5% quota has been specified for disabled people holding their rehabilitation certificates out of the total number of employees in each unit of the establishment. This also applies to the state and public sector and organizations. It is to be specified for disabled persons who have received a rehabilitation certificate 5% of the total number the employees in each of the units of the

*... stigma is a perception generated in a social encounter which differentiates between two persons on the basis of their ability or disability*

*Work is a right, a duty and an honor that the state guarantees...*



managerial of the state, its public organizations, and public sector ... (art. 10) (Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs 1987: 5). (Trans. is mine).

If this law is violated the person in charge is subjected to a fine or imprisonment (art. 16). Upon rehabilitation or receiving an academic degree, the persons with disabilities are registered in a special register in the Offices for the Employment of the Persons with Disability in the Ministry of Manpower. Then they are distributed according to the quota (Qandil 1989; Gad 2002).

#### Legislation versus Implementation

In reality, there is a big gap between legislation and implementation. The most recent figures for 2001 provided by Gad, a labor researcher in the Ministry of Manpower, shows that from among 23,046 persons with disabilities registered in the various Manpower offices all over the country, only 2343 have been employed. This means less than 10% of the number registered have been employed<sup>6</sup>. It should be taken into consideration that not all persons with disability of employment age are registered with Manpower. However, Gad has tried to make a rough estimate of the size of the problem. Assuming that Egypt follows World Health Organization (WHO) estimates of 10% of the population being disabled – six million are present – yet she calculates that only 0.04% are included in mainstream employment which is a shocking percentage that calls for serious attention. Unfortunately there are no separate figures for women with disability at that stage but it is expected to be worse than those for men for many reasons explained below.

#### Reasons for the Unemployment and Underemployment of People with Disabilities

Furthermore, Gad has identified a number of major reasons for people with disability being unemployed and underemployed. One is that many private organizations refuse to hire persons with disability and prefer to pay the fine of L.E. 100 every now and then, which is very little money<sup>7</sup>. There are not enough jobs offered in government and the public sector to accommodate the large number of people with disability who prefer to work there, as the environment is less hostile than other employment sectors. The weak commitment of the responsible parties to fill the quota is because they are more committed to solving the problem of unemployment of the non-disabled persons. This raises the issue of the type of citizenship a person with disability has. The difficulty in taking any serious action against governmental units if they are below quota or if they unjustly fire an employee with a disability is really a big problem. The law states that action should be taken against the responsible person, who is in that case the minister, him/herself. All

this demonstrates how lenient the law is with these people and how inconsiderate its relation to people with disability (Gad 2002).

Furthermore, it should also be mentioned that there is a very high drop out from employment among the employees with disabilities for various reasons (Gad 2002). First the physical barriers at home, streets... etc. and in the workplace prevent the person with a disability from normalizing his/her life (Hahn 1988; Gad 2002). Also, the transport limitations prevent the person with disability from reaching their workplaces safely and within reasonable cost. The inaccessibility of the workplace to people with disability is another major barrier. Many people with disabilities find it very difficult to handle the work situation because no alterations have been made to meet their needs. Low wages and the inhospitable environment by which the people with disability are met also drives them more out of work. Thus, the person with disability is further disabled in his/her job opportunities and gains.

All the above mentioned weak points in the law and the mentioned reasons for people with disability to drop out are the major concern of this research which will be investigated through comprehensive fieldwork to cover all aspects of the problem.

#### The Situation of Women with Disabilities

Women with disabilities are in a worse position because of their gender and their disability. This double prejudice is the root of the inferior status of women with disabilities, making them the world's most disadvantaged group (Boylan 1991).

In Egypt, as in many other developing countries, rehabilitation services and special education schools are male-oriented and totally inadequate in meeting the needs of the female half of the population of people with disabilities. As rehabilitation centers and special schools are usually located in main cities, girls and women with disabilities are unable to travel that far because of the immobility imposed on their gender and because of parental overprotection in such societies. Parents feel that they should exercise more protection over girls with disabilities as they are perceived as helpless and as an easy target for abuse (Boylan 1991). This curtails the chances of a girl being rehabilitated and/or educated either in her traditional gender role or in vocational occupations. Thus, these girls and women are neither capable of practicing household routines nor capable of working outside their homes. As a result they are excused from some of their obligations and denied their rights, needs and desires. In this way women with disabilities lose their social status and are forced into social isolation behind doors (Nosseir 1990). Without being trained or educated to perform an

income generating job the women become totally financially dependent on their families and relatives which results in their further degradation.

A number of statistics and percentages clarify the enormity of the neglect of women with disability and their maximum marginalization either in health services or in rehabilitation. Figures show that the illiteracy rate among Egyptian men with disabilities ten years and over reaches 51.9%, while the illiteracy rate among Egyptian women with disabilities ten years and over reaches 79%. Employment among Egyptian men with disabilities fifteen years and over reaches 65.9% while the percentage of Egyptian women with disabilities is only 13% (Nosseir 1989). This shows the very meager education and employment opportunities that these women have compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, there is an urgent need to relocate or establish new rehabilitation centers as closely as possible to all the people with disabilities, especially women. However, the high cost of such projects is an obstacle in developing countries such as Egypt because of the scarce resources and the low priority allocated to them (Nosseir 1990).

#### Conclusion

Although many problems of disability have usually been presented as an inevitable outcome of the impairment of people with disabilities, my research indicates that the major problems are the outcomes of individual and social prejudicial attitudes and not personal traits. Having gone through many of the reasons resulting in the marginalization of women with disabilities, what is now needed is a framework that could help resolve some of the above mentioned problems. Many of the necessary solutions are applicable to people with disabilities in general since women with disabilities can not be divorced from the main body of people with disabilities.

In developing countries, labor laws are outdated, limited in scope and are male biased. They do not include modern forms of employment, news services and technologies and occupational hazards etc. and all these have effects on persons with disabilities and women in particular. Egypt suffers from all the above. The International Labor Organization (ILO) urges governments to revise their labor policies and amend them to widen their scopes, add anti-discriminatory provisions and increase penalties to whoever acts against these provisions. This legislation should take into account the needs of women workers with disability. It also should identify the gap between rural and urban areas in the same country (ILO 1995).

Education is one of the major needs of people with disabilities. Therefore it should be compulsory for all children

with disabilities whether males or females. Laws should be applied and strong penalties should be imposed to enforce them.

Rehabilitation and training are essential for children who cannot be educated in order to enable them to acquire some skills to get employed. New technologies should be available to facilitate various tasks for the children with disabilities. Also the integration of these children into ordinary schools should be done whenever possible to allow both disabled and non-disabled children to deal with each other in a normal environment and setting (Boylan 1991; Hagrass 1994).

Concerning employment, people with disabilities should be highly trained in skills that have a high market value. Suitable equipment must be provided to facilitate their job performance. The proper allocation of people with disabilities in their jobs and the elimination of difficulties related to accessibility and mobility in the workplace should be supervised by government personnel and work inspectors (Qandil 1989). Strong measures should be taken against employers who do not abide by the law of the employment of people with disabilities, not merely a fine of 100 pounds. It is worth noting that the Egyptian law of rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities is under serious revision to improve its implementation and to fill in its gaps. The role of organizations working in the field of disability to put pressure on decision makers to revise this law cannot be ignored.

Policy makers should also be sensitized to the special accessibility needs of people with disabilities. For instance the distances people walk, the steps they climb, and the materials they read are a strain on persons with functional limitations. These discriminatory factors should be eliminated by bearing in mind a norm of inclusion instead of a norm of exclusion. Making streets, buildings and sidewalks accessible to people in wheelchairs takes their needs as the norm but does not exclude others. Indeed such renovations may be also beneficial to others like, for example, people with bicycles and parents with baby strollers. By thinking about the different others "we could make difference mean something new; we could make all the difference" (Minow 1994).

The media as a powerful tool in disseminating informa-

*Education ...  
should be  
compulsory  
for all children  
with disabilities*

tion should be intelligently used. First it is important to increase social awareness toward the causes of disability and how to avoid it. Second, the role of the media in portraying positive images of persons with disabilities especially women should be examined. The need to provide role models to other persons with disabilities and to encourage social integration is important. The proper use of the media can make people get rid of traditional practices that are discriminatory. Depicting the person with a disability as not only a deviant body but as a whole integrated person (a mind and a body) is a way to make people accept and deal with the persons with disabilities as an integral part of society (Scheper-Hughes 1984).

It is obvious that any improvement in the social status of women in general is an improvement of the position of women with disabilities. However, these women should fight for themselves and not wait for other women to gain rights for them indirectly since they have additional vital needs. As Amal Ibrahim forcefully announced in a conference about the social integration of women with disabilities:

As a blind woman I can say that equality can not be achieved from one side. Therefore, women are not only to be educated and trained, but also have to be guided psychologically and socially to face all kinds of discrimination, difficulties and be as active as possible to prove their capabilities, since rights are to be taken and not given. (1994: 4)

As women's organizations are oblivious to the needs of women with disabilities, these organizations should be sensitized to their special problems. Hence they can incorporate the women with disabilities among them and include their needs with the needs of other women (cf. Moore 1990: 183-186; Carlsson 1997).

Women with disabilities must therefore organize themselves to make both the disability movements and the women's movements aware of their physical, psychological, and social demands. They should push their way through both movements for proper inclusion and refuse being marginalized (Blackwell-Stratton et al. 1988).

In Egypt, we should start to form organizations of<sup>8</sup> people with disabilities instead of organizations for<sup>9</sup> disabled people to be able to prioritize our needs and demand our rights instead of being only the recipients of charity (Morris 1991). Empowering people with disabilities by having group solidarity and forming pressure groups is of key importance. Thus, another target for these organizations is raising awareness of people with disabilities themselves, their families, and society to the rights of people with disabilities. (Oliver 1990). Women with dis-

abilities organizations should be formed having these concepts clear and emphasizing the gender aspect of the problem. Furthermore, as information is power, and as people with disabilities do not have enough of it, these organizations should also have special publications to communicate to their members new knowledge, new technologies, success stories, complaints, aspirations and politics (Shakespeare et al. 1996; Goffman 1963).

People with disabilities should find ways to penetrate "ideological state apparatuses" such as the media, schools, political parties, mosques and churches and the family, all of which are responsible for perpetuating and reinforcing dominant ideologies (Moore 1990). By doing so they could make people aware of the disability issue from the grassroots to high level state organizations. Furthermore, state apparatuses should enhance measures to change negative social attitudes towards women with disabilities in particular (Carlsson 1997).

Disability movements should be more politicized to be able to influence decision-making. As people with disabilities have voting rights, they could lobby and form pressure groups on certain parliamentary candidates. Also, as a minority group they should exert pressure to have their own representatives in parliament so that policies emerge bearing in mind the population of people with disabilities. They should also pressure the government to allocate more resources towards the health of people with disabilities, environmental and societal needs. In doing so, we are asserting our rights as citizens of this society and community (Morris 1991). Women with disabilities should be equal participants in all the above political decision-making processes (Carlsson 1997).

## END NOTES

1. Live television transmission from parliament on 23rd April 2000.
2. Al Ahram: 24th April 2000.
3. *Ibid*.
4. <http://economic.idsc.gov.eg/book/laborhtm>. This is the central agency for information in Egypt.
5. These records are taken from the register of the Division of Care for the Disabled persons in the Ministry of Manpower.
6. Any figures for the number of people with disabilities in Egypt should be taken with care.
7. This is equal to \$20 or £12.50.
8. Organizations of: means that disabled people run their own organizations since they know their needs better. They focus on demanding rights.
9. Organizations for: are mostly elitist people's organizations made to help the poor and disadvantaged. They are mostly charity organizations.

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# The Disabled Yemeni Woman

## ■ Raja' Abdullah Ahmad al-Musaabi

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The number of disabled women in the Republic of Yemen is more than a million. Yemeni society is conservative and individuals cling to the prevalent customs and traditions

that oppress women, treat them unjustly and consider them inferior. This contradicts Islam, a religion that honors women and has given them many of the rights which some try to deprive them of in the name of customs and traditions, and sometimes in the name of false interpretations of Islam. Inequality is prevalent in spite of the fact that most of the government laws do not discriminate against women and do not prevent them from obtaining their

rights. On the contrary, the government tries to apply a policy granting women their rights to education, work, participation in politics, etc.

Some discriminatory laws that deprive women of many of

their rights still exist. However, several government organizations have taken steps to change these laws. The government has started to respond and has taken many measures that call for women's full participation in all domains of public life. This is why the percentage of girls attending schools, universities and institutions has risen, resulting in a decrease in illiteracy rates among women, and an increase in the number of women doctors, teachers, lawyers and judges. Women now have access to all positions and posts, thus we have female ambassadors, ministers, under secretaries of state, etc.

Despite the efforts exerted by the government as well as non-governmental organizations, treating women as inferior beings, minimizing their value and not acknowledging their role in the development of society is still widespread. Besides, those who oppose the women's cause are fighting women in all possible ways.

After having exposed the general condition of women, I will now turn to the disabled woman. If an "ordinary" woman is a victim of all kinds of violence and bitter humiliation, the disabled woman is exposed to all this twice: first because she is a woman, and second because she is disabled. The disabled woman is still deprived of

many, if not all, of her rights. She is deprived of those rights on five levels:

### The First Level: That of the State and its Various Organs

The state deprives the disabled woman of most of her rights, if not all, by ignoring her needs in its legislations and programs. When the government promulgates a law it does not take into consideration the special case of the disabled woman and her specific needs and hardly includes her in its policies and agenda. The state fails to differentiate between the situation of disabled women and that of "ordinary" women. Hence, even when the state concentrates on the disabled woman and includes her in its programs, it still talks about her in general terms given that there are no programs specifically tailored for her.

When the state started preparing special laws for disabled persons and promulgated the law for the care and rehabilitation of the disabled in 1999, it was issued as a general law with no attention paid to the special conditions and specific needs of the disabled woman.

There are physically disabled people in various government, private and public buildings, but these buildings fail to comply with accessibility requirements for the disabled and are not accessible to a wheelchair user. This is considered a main obstacle preventing disabled women from participating in most activities. Moreover, it hinders them from acquiring their basic rights, and mainly their right to education given that many of the educational facilities such as schools, institutions and universities are still not equipped to accommodate disabled persons, have no special signs for the deaf or Braille for the blind, or specialized staff to help out.

### The Second Level: Society

Up until now, both men and women in society have failed to accept disabled persons. They believe that the disabled in general, and disabled women in particular are either a curse on the family or a burden on both family and society. According to them a disabled woman has no value. Hence, many families work hard on hiding their disabled daughters and sometimes go as far as denying they even exist by locking them away the way animals are confined.

These families deprive them of their most basic rights but primarily their right to education and schooling. Parents prefer to send their non-disabled children instead. This is the case in well-to-do families. However, if the family is poor, sending a disabled girl to school is out of the question. She is kept at home to serve the family and is treated like a maid. After the death of her parents, it is her

older brother who inherits her share, and after she moves to his house she is still treated as a servant whose opinion is never asked and who is still deprived of all her rights.

This is the attitude of the family. Socially too, disabled women are discriminated against. Society considers disabled women to be inferior. They are looked down upon, mocked, shamed, and made fun of; they have no right to get married given that they are considered unfit for marriage. Disabled women are viewed as incapable of being responsible for a family, a husband, children or any other obligations.

### The Third Level: The Media

The Arab media in general and the Yemeni one in particular, overlook disabled women. The media represent disabled women in a manner void of all respect and esteem and full of sarcasm. It indirectly deprives them of all their rights since they do not make the public aware of their issues and concerns. They fail to highlight how disabled women should be treated, cared for, and respected as human beings and not as inferior beings. Moreover, in its programs, sitcoms and films the media can often be condescending towards the disabled. Thus we regularly hear comments such as "Do I lack a hand or foot?"

In addition, those working in the media know nothing about the needs, issues and rights of disabled women. Besides, they are unwilling to make society more sensitive to their rights and fail to deal with them as equals to non-disabled women.

### The Fourth Level: The Non-Governmental Organizations

People in charge of non-governmental organizations, whether working on general issues or women's issues, are no different from society in neglecting the disabled woman and all her rights. They do not include her in their programs and projects, either directly or indirectly. Besides, those organizations specialized in the disability issue prepare programs and projects that aim at the rehabilitation and training of the disabled woman. They do not concentrate on inclusion, hence they fail to integrate her into society and boost her self-confidence. On the contrary, they try to isolate her from society and do not ask for any of her rights.

*... both men and women in society have failed to accept disabled persons.*

**The Fifth Level: The Disabled Women**

We have noted society's attitude towards disabled women and its rejection of them, starting with the family that treats them as inferior beings, deprives them of all their rights, and considers them incapable of depending on themselves; moving to society that minimizes their value, taunts them because of their disability and treats them as inferior beings; to the media which presents them in an unjust way and does not play its role in creating an awareness of disabled women's rights and their importance to development; to the non-governmental organizations that do not try to integrate them in society and insist on their rights; and last but not least, the state that does not consider disabled women in its programs, plans and policies, and does not promulgate laws to protect disabled women and ensure all their rights.

As a result of all this deprivation, marginalization, rejec-

tion, derision and humiliation the disabled woman has no self confidence, is isolated and does not ask for her rights, is incapable of joining society and prefers to remain unnoticed.

Until three years ago, the situation of the disabled woman in Yemen looked set to continue along these lines. Nowadays, there is some interest given that some organizations joined with the government to prepare programs and issue various regulations to improve the state of the disabled woman and her image in society.

Even if a number of disabled Yemeni women have acquired most of their rights to study and work, etc., this does not mean that they represent a majority. They are still a minority, which we hope will become a majority, as we hope that the disabled woman will gain all her rights, and mainly her right to be acknowledged as a human being with all a human being's rights and obligations.

## *The Draft Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is about:*

- *Dignity.*
- *Freedom of choice.*
- *Independence.*
- *Non-discrimination.*
- *Full inclusion.*
- *Participation.*
- *Respect of difference.*
- *Acceptance of disability.*
- *Equality of opportunity.*

<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/ahcwgreport.htm>

# Disability Report in Lebanon:

**Where do we stand regarding  
the application of Law 220/2000,  
and admitting the rights  
of the disabled people in Lebanon?**

■ Lebanese Council of Disabled People (LCDP)

The Lebanese Council of Disabled People (LCDP) wishes to thank all those who participated in preparing this report, and particularly the National Association for the Rights of Disabled People in Lebanon (NARD), while also commending the aid given by the Ministry of Social Affairs in helping to provide the statistics pertaining to Disability in Lebanon.

## Introduction

After the United Nations decreed every 3rd December as International Day of Disabled Persons, this date has been transformed into a yearly occasion for organizing activities to benefit disabled persons. So as not to convert these activities into a folkloric tradition which would make the occasion lose its importance, The Lebanese Council of Disabled People (LCDP) decided to make it an occasion for presenting a yearly report evaluating the conditions of disabled persons in Lebanon with the aim of determining what has and has not been achieved regarding the implementation of Law 220/2000 concerning disabled persons and their integration in the main stream life of the Lebanese society. The report seeks to show all the contributions, policies and programs pertaining to disabled persons undertaken by both the public and private sectors.

## The Number of Disabled Persons and their IDs in Lebanon

Estimating the number of disabled persons depends on the definition of disability and on how information is gathered. In developed countries where disability is broadly defined, the percentage of disabled people is high. It is around 15% in the United States and 19% in Australia. In the third world and the Arab world in particular, the percentage is around 1% according to the statistics of many of these countries due to the narrow definition and the way information is gathered. According to the United Nations, around 10% of the world population are disabled. This means that in Lebanon today there are about 400,000 disabled persons. To be cautious and depend on the definition according to the Law and the National Organization for the Disabled Persons, this report will consider that the percentage in Lebanon is around 5% of the total number of inhabitants in Lebanon. This is the percentage adopted in the Arab countries, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Based on this, nearly 200,000 persons suffer from one kind of disability or another in Lebanon. However, the statistics concerning the persons that have registered themselves as persons with disability and received the disability identification card until today is

51,000 persons. The numbers regarding the breakdown in terms of disability show that the greatest percentage is for the physically 54%, followed by the mentally impaired 27%, then by those with impaired hearing 10%, and blind persons 8%. The relatively high percentage of physically disabled is partly due to the Lebanese civil war, but also to car and swimming accidents and poliomyelitis, while the high percentage of mentally disabled is due to the lack of social awareness of its causes and the necessity of taking preventive measures.

The statistics for 2004 is 1000 more than the number of applications the Ministry of Social Affairs had received at the end of 2003. This increase is not only due to the increase in the number in 2004, but to the increase in the

number of those who applied for this card, which proves that the card has become more important to them because of the increase in what it offers, such as the aid offered by the Ministry of Social Affairs, exemption from paying customs on imported cars for physically disabled persons, a 50% discount on MEA airplane tickets, plus dispensations from paying the municipality taxes. The statistics gathered by the Ministry of Social Affairs for the year 2004 show that

around 7342 services were offered in the aid program, services from which more than 2000 physically disabled persons benefited, including 707 moveable wheelchairs. Also 465 exemptions from customs were given for means of communications, and 1844 for exempting cars from the mechanic tax, besides 15,000 exemptions from the municipality tax.

These limited numbers, compared to what is expected considering the number of disabled persons in Lebanon, are due to the fact that what the ID card has offered until now is much less than what is necessary to satisfy the needs of the majority of people with disability. The total sum of what has been spent on aiding them is almost LL. 1 billion compared to LL. 1500 billion the Ministry spent on contracts with 66 institutions (most of them in Beirut and the mountains, whereas the number of disabled people in both areas does not exceed 45% of all disabled people in Lebanon) and these 66 contracts cover approximately the provision of services for around 6000 disabled persons.

#### **Health, Supportive, Habilitation and Rehabilitation Services**

The Law stipulates that the Ministry of Health has to ensure full coverage (100%) of all health and supportive services, i.e. surgical operations, medical treatment, medications, X-rays, laboratory analyses, treatment, technical aid and instruments, even for those who have another insurance policy. It also stipulates that all the health covering organizations have to unify their services, tariff and administrative procedures. The Law also asks for a joint committee to be formed together with the National Council on Disability in order to ensure the implementation of regulations concerning health issues.

Reviewing what has been implemented regarding health since the Law was issued until today, we find that not much has been done. In spite of the fact that the joint committee was formed over two years ago, the health services are still very few compared to what is stated in the Law.

The Minister of Health, Mr. Suleiman Franjeh, in the 2003 government issued a circular calling on all hospitals to recognize their ID as a basis for accepting disabled persons for hospitalization at the expense of the Ministry. However, the circular was not implemented for two reasons: First of all it did not include the steps for implementing it so as to lessen the complications a disabled person faces in order to obtain the Ministry of Health's approval to cover the expenses of hospitalization. Secondly, most of the hospitals refused to implement it due to the financial problems between the Ministry and these hospitals. There are some instruments and appliances that are necessary, even vital for the surgery of disabled people such as the technical aids, replacement tools and implants used in surgery, which the hospitals refuse to cover on behalf of the Ministry, claiming that they cause them great material loss because of their high cost, the Ministry's delay in payment and the difference in monetary exchange. Finally, many hospitals do not accept the sick on behalf of the Ministry through most of the months of the year because in the first months of the year they exhaust the budget allotted to them by the Ministry.

Disabled persons are still deprived of their legal right to medications and the other outpatient medical services that are charged to the Ministry of Health. Also, training sessions have not been organized, as decreed by the Law, nor has medical awareness of the health issues pertaining to disability increased.

Administratively, the Minister of Health in the 2003 government decreed the establishment of a unit within the Ministry specialized in disability issues, but it has still not

been established. The only effective service of the Ministry is the provision of artificial limbs at the expense of the Ministry, and we can consider this to be the only direct service it offers disabled persons. The whole sum paid by this sector for artificial limbs in the year 2004 amounted to approximately LL 1 billion, which is the cost of a thousand artificial limbs, according to the Ministry and the Syndicate of Artificial Limb Producers. But what should be mentioned here is that this budget is the limit of what this sector can pay to cover artificial limbs, whereas the Syndicate argues that the need is for a much higher budget. Then, too, the Ministry does not yet cover the expense of sophisticated limbs such as electronic hands which are needed by those who have lost a hand and its fingers.

The other medical services from which disabled persons might have profited are those offered by the Ministry of Health to all citizens without paying attention to the care and specialization a disabled person needs, although everyone knows that health problems are the main obstacle preventing disabled people from integrating in society and being socially and economically productive.

#### **The Accessible Environment, Including Transport and Housing**

The Law stipulates that all public buildings, installations, facilities and means of transportation should implement the technical regulations that facilitate disabled people's access to them.

The National Association for the rights of disabled people in Lebanon inspected 612 public and governmental institutions in Beirut, including universities, hotels, restaurants, theatres, etc. and found that most of these buildings were not adapted to the needs of physically disabled persons who use wheelchairs, contrary to what the law had stated, making it mandatory to have these buildings adapted within five years of issuing it. The main reason for this is the absence of official building regulations adopted by the government and not including those regulations in the construction laws, which would enable interested parties to make their inclusion a precondition to issuing a permit for a public building. The Department of Civil Organization together with the Ministry of Interior and the municipalities, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Libnur Institution, the Syndicates of Engineers, the Educational Center for Research, and the National Organization for the Disabled have written a preliminary project stating the technical norms that have to be applied, and introduced the necessary changes in the construction laws. However, these changes are still being discussed in parliament and have not been approved, which means a delay in being able to oblige the construction sector to apply the essential regulations required to meet the needs of disabled persons.

Besides this, the Law states that disabled people and their families should not be charged on public transport and that at least 15% of public busses should be adapted to the use of disabled people, especially those with wheelchairs. The state is now in the process of formulating the specifications for a tender to buy 250 busses for public transport without taking into account the need for busses for disabled persons. Naturally, neither the means of public transport nor those busses already in use have been converted, and until now the committee responsible for the transport of disabled persons has not started to function. Then, too, the special parking spaces pertaining to disabled people have not been changed, nor have the sessions to train the police and civil servants in handling disabled drivers started. As a result, the problem of transport for disabled persons has not been solved. Nor has anything been done about the rehabilitation of the required percentage of homes in the public and private housing complexes, or about the housing or rehabilitation loans and specifications. This shows that none of the main articles enabling a disabled person to be independent and integrate has been applied. Besides, the Directorate-General of Customs insists on the narrowest interpretation of the Law dispensing with the payment of customs duties on cars for disabled persons, which leads to having a big section of them deprived of these exemptions, with the result of also depriving disabled people from acquiring a means of transportation which will facilitate both their life and social integration.

#### **Education and Sports**

According to the Law it is the duty of the Ministry of Education and Higher Learning to name the members of the specialized committee which comprises all the administrations and institutions involved in education, teaching and disability related issues, so as to state all the requirements and procedures that would lead to educational integration, and, in any case, guarantee a suitable education for all: young and old. It is also the duty of the Ministry of Youth and Sports to form a committee specialized in sports whose duty it is to assert the regulations and conditions of the games, how to perform them, organize competitions and private sports unions.

*The relatively high percentage of physically disabled is partly due to the Lebanese civil war.*

*The Ministry of Education is still neglecting the need to establish a united sign language in Lebanon.*

In spite of the fact that more than a year has elapsed since issuing the decree pertaining to the educational committee stipulated in Law 220, the members of this committee have not yet been assigned, and thus the real work of that committee has not yet started. It can be said that most of the schools in Lebanon are not adapted, and, as a result, cannot be attended by pupils with disability. The statistics of the Ministry of Social Affairs clearly state that almost half of those with a disability card are not educated. For, in spite of Law 220 and many other circulars before it pertaining to accepting disabled people in government schools, a great number of those schools still refuse to accept students with disability in their classes, particularly the blind. As a result, the vast majority of disabled people are still deprived of being integrated in normal schools. The only choice left to them is to stay at home without any education, or to enter one of the pastoral specialized schools, and this clearly contradicts the Law which insists on the necessity of integration wherever possible.

In conclusion, not enough money was assigned, nor were schools made accessible or the special needs met, and no contracts were signed with institutions of special education or specialized technical rehabilitation, although something positive has been acquired with regard to the official exams. While the "committee specialized in teaching disabled

persons and those with special needs" and the "committee specialized in sports for disabled people" have not been formed, the material and moral contributions that have been made towards specialized sports are not enough and cannot be considered suitable "programs." The Ministry of Education is still neglecting the need to establish a united sign language in Lebanon and to establish within the cadre of the Ministry a unit specialized in disability.

#### Work and Employment

The Law stipulates that both the public and private sectors have to reserve 3% of their jobs for disabled people in companies where the number of their employees exceeds 60. The Law also stipulates that the National Institution for Employment, together with concerned ministries, must ensure suitable technical training and direct disabled people to the work market or the protected workshops. The

Law also stipulates the formation of a joint committee with representatives from the Ministry of Labor, the economic sectors and the National Council on Disability, in order to formulate the means of implementing the articles of the law pertaining to employment and work.

The joint committee was formed and during 30 months 24 meetings were held with full quorum, but the representatives of the economic sectors – except for the banks and insurance companies – and some of those representing the official administrations were absent. This shows how limited the interest in the problem is. After the Law was passed by the parliament, the Social Security Directorate decided to give clearances only to companies in the private sector who have implemented the article that imposes a quota for employing disabled persons. Then a decree was issued by the Ministry of Labor granting unemployment indemnity. However, this decree was not enforced because the Ministry of Finance refused to establish a special account into which the penalties for breaking the Law would be deposited and then transferred to finance the unemployment indemnity. This caused the Social Security Directorate to give up linking the provision of clearance to the employment of people with disability.

In reality disabled people's right to employment has not been realized yet, nor are the penalties for not applying the Law being collected, nor has the machinery for collecting them been set up. And the indemnity for unemployment is not being paid. All that is offered are modest attempts "to train disabled people in a trade" instead of implementing the Law. The reason is simply the concoction of a legal problem by the Ministries of Labor and of Finance.

#### Conclusion

A realistic reading of the results four years after the Law was issued clearly shows that we are still very far from implementing it. Apart from some serious effort on the part of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the National Institution for Employment and the Committee for Artificial Limbs in the Ministry of Health, no serious effort is being made to implement the Law. The whole sum paid by the government in aid of disabled people is not more than \$15 million, while the main load is carried by the parents and non-governmental societies.

Disabled people are still the victims of peace just as they were the victims of war, and they are still suffering from the negative effects of the policies that are being pursued. Everyone had believed that ratifying the law was only the beginning of acknowledging the rights in preparation to implementing them, while the essential rights of disabled people are still being neglected, such

as the right to a home, transport, education, work and unemployment indemnity, and the right to go wherever other people go. In a nutshell, they still suffer from being deprived of their right to development and being obliged to need help, instead of being independent and participating in society. Laws are not sufficient in themselves unless they are implemented, supervised and critically revised.

Disabled people still face an official policy of carelessness and noncommittal in spite of their rights having been approved humanely, legally and developmentally by all international conventions and declarations. In the absence of social incentives to give them their rights according to

political and administrative programs, people with disability are the first victims of economic changes, and are marginalized and excluded even more. The Lebanese disabled people are at the bottom rung of poverty in Lebanon: a shameful and very disturbing situation.

We are clearly aware of the impossibility of implementing the Law in one year. This is why, after the ratification of the Arab Decade of the Disabled 2004-2013, Lebanon has been obliged to announce a Lebanese Decade for the Disabled guaranteeing a real plan for implementing the Law during those ten years. Integrating disabled people is the means of transforming them from a load on the state into productive and active citizens in society.



# The Situation of Visually Impaired Women in the Arab World

■ Ghada Hasan, Jordan

Disability Activist, Jordan

One of the difficulties confronting researchers working on the situation of the disabled in any country of the Arab world is the lack of data and statistics. Visual impairment is a unique kind of disability given that people suffering from such a disability are the least in number. Moreover, because it is a sensory disability this makes it complex in nature. It is a disability that has serious impacts on all aspects of life: the educational, the rehabilitational, the social, the cultural, the economic, and so on. The interrelation of these aspects leads to the lack of understanding of the needs of this group.

The gap in understanding the problems of this disability has also resulted in formulating strategies and plans which are not in the interests or ambitions of the visually impaired and have contributed to and deepened their isolation in society.

Any plan or strategy should target granting equal opportunities to the visually impaired at all levels of society for them to achieve equal participation and integration afterwards. The term visual impairment in this paper includes the blind and partially sighted.

The situation of visually impaired women in any society is like carving in stone as they are doubly discriminated against – first for being disabled and secondly for being women. This article will concentrate on the aspects of education and rehabilitation as these factors affect the other levels of life such as the social, the employment and the cultural. The new trend in the Arab world – and all over the world – is to adopt an inclusive education system as a means to educate the visually impaired. This sudden transferring approach from the specialized institutional service providers to an inclusive education system has created obstacles and difficulties for the visually impaired in general, and for women in particular.

Such a statement needs to be proved and this requires a thorough presentation of the philosophy of inclusive education and the strategy of its application in our schools for us to reach the conclusion that adopting any new strategy in education requires a study of all factors involved. The suc-

cess of an experiment in any country does not necessarily mean that the same result is to be over-generalized as each country has its specific circumstances.

## Visually Impaired Girls and the Inclusive Education System

An inclusive education system is the vehicle to the best education and rehabilitation models to be offered to the disabled – even those with sensory disabilities including the visually impaired – as it leads to them being fully integrated in society at all levels. This system grants the disabled equality. Inclusive education is defined as granting education to all in order for them to obtain the skills that would lead them to achieve equality and full participation in society.

In the light of this definition the following remarks provoke contemplation:

1. The percentage of illiteracy among women in the Arab world is 52%. A simple question imposes itself here: What would be the rate of illiteracy amongst visually impaired women?
2. Education is not compulsory in all developing countries and laws are not strict with those families that deprive their disabled members – especially girls – of their right to a proper education.
3. Governments adopt the model of inclusive education to reduce the financial budget granted to the disabled through specialist institutions. The disabled will be integrated without extra financial burden as the number of those integrated will be greater. In this way the governments would avoid the criticism directed at them of serving a very limited percentage of the disabled.
4. Integration in regular schools takes place without prior preparation of the physical environment, the community of teachers and students, the adapted curricula, the proper training of the service providers and the recipients and without the awareness among the public of the nature of visual impairment, its capacities and limits. This strategy adopts the philosophy of the electric shock being the ideal treatment method.
5. Organizations for the blind are mostly marginalized and not involved in planning, monitoring and implementing any activity or project related to the visually impaired due to its failure to be the sole representative of the blind, regardless of their sex.
6. Visually impaired women are not represented in the body of the organization of the blind; accordingly their organizations cannot reflect, defend and enforce their interests, rights, ambitions and longings. Visually impaired women are not incorporated in their community of the blind so how can they be heard and supported by the other bodies of the community?
7. Society's discriminatory attitudes and approaches

lead to assisting the visually impaired male to obtain his basic right of education on the basis that he is the family's breadwinner, while depriving the visually impaired women of their right on the basis that they are no more than a catastrophe which has to be denied and struggled to be hidden to avoid the consequences of their existence in the community as a whole.

## The Recurrent Scenario of the Process of Integrating Visually Impaired Girls into the Inclusive Education System

A sighted guide leads the visually impaired girl to her classroom. Finally she reaches her destination. She is seated at her desk that is void of any Braille book or device. There is so much noise around her that she cannot make use of her hearing abilities. The noise is so loud and to her confusion the language of the dialogue between the teacher and the students is unknown to her as it is based on body language. Even the oral ability of the teacher is not utilized as the blackboard came to replace it. The bell rings for all students to move to grant their muscles relaxation but she remains in her place. Everybody is whispering, "A blind girl." She is excluded from all scientific subjects and from physical education lessons as well. The day is over and the sighted guide comes to pick up the blind girl who is still in her place as if she was growing there. She goes back home with a negative experience deciding not to go to school again or to continue her education. Her decision is supported by all those surrounding her – what would a blind girl get from education anyway? This scenario applies to the majority, while there is another scenario, which is rare. The blind girl is strengthened by a person or a group to confront these impossible circumstances. It is recorded that a female friend or the older sister or mother are the ones to assume this role. The journey of struggle starts not with the visually impaired girl but also with her supporters. She is to be guided to school daily, all educational materials are to be recorded for her on tapes. Her guide becomes the artery of her life. She or he interferes even in the way she looks and with whom she is to be acquainted. The result is total dependence on that sighted guide and guardian.

## The Consequences of this Model of Inclusive Education

The impacts of such a model are catastrophic at all levels. The visually impaired girl will become dependent on an

*Inclusive education ... granting education to all for them to obtain the skills to achieve equality and full participation in society.*



external factor to make her life go on. She will become convinced that this is the limit of her abilities. She will lack the interest and the courage to compete with her sighted peers on the basis of her assumed shortcomings. She will accept anything offered to her to be a blessing not a right. She will sink in her darkness, depriving herself of her basic rights of being a female who has feelings, instincts, dreams and ambitions. Her lack of self-confidence and feeling of inferiority will lead her to isolate herself socially and psychologically. If she were studying in a school for the blind she would not realize this gap between herself and the others.

The application of this inclusive education experiment on her in this way played the role of deepening what it means to be a female and blind at the same time. The haphazard method of integration will not have its effect on the visually impaired female only but on society as well. The society we are pointing at comprises the students, the teachers, the families, the surroundings and the community as a whole. The sighted peers of the visually impaired female will view her as different. This considerable difference is attributed to the lack of the compensatory skills which could make up for her blindness.

*The visually impaired female denies her body and its needs, the importance of feeling and behaving as a female.*

The problem is not in that she studies in a different way but in the fact that she does not study approximately half of the subjects. She is not to study mathematics, chemistry, physics or biology. She is not even required to learn the sections with maps in geography. The educational level of the visually impaired girl in relation to the accumulation of knowledge of sighted girls does not reach more than 30% of the competence of her sighted peers. The gap would not only be in educational knowledge but also in the comprehension of the concept of the self. The visually impaired female denies her body and its needs, the importance of feeling and behaving as a female. Her family, school teachers and friends will always view her as a child. Accordingly, she cannot have anything in common with the other students as she is not at the same level as them educationally- and nature-wise as a female.

Under the circumstances of this unplanned integration teachers possess very low educational expectations of the visually impaired girls, therefore, whatever they acquire is excellent and more than enough. They are kind and extremely humane and understanding to have accepted

such difficult cases without any training or extra financial incentives. Society as a whole will combine to maintain the preconceived ideas, the discriminatory attitudes and the misconceptions about visually impaired persons in general and blind girls and women in particular.

This study is not meant to attack the inclusive education system, but to highlight its destructiveness for visually impaired girls in case it is not applied in the proper way.

The following steps and measures are recommended to ensure the complete and proper integration of visually impaired girls in an inclusive education system:

- Requiring all hospitals, clinics and other health/medical centers to register the birth of visually impaired girls, or cases of visually impaired girls/women visiting the medical centers for treatment, aiming at having correct statistics of the number of visually impaired females to offer them their basic right of education.
- Increasing compulsory education for the disabled in general and visually impaired girls in particular from the primary stages to the secondary to ensure literacy among this group. Laws must enforce this by imposing penalties on those families violating this direction.
- Approaching governments to allocate funds to improve the standard of education for the disabled as a part of the developing program for the country.
- Strengthening the organizations of the blind to become the sole representative of the rights and interests of the visually impaired people in the country whether they are living in rural areas or cities, and regardless of them being male or female – i.e. a strong organization of the blind covering the whole country serving both sexes justly.
- Strengthening the presence of visually impaired women in the body of the organization of the blind on the executive board and different committees. This representation must be strong at the level of the headquarters and local branches as well. This could be implemented through imposing a quota for women's representation and for the visually impaired women elected to take on the responsibility of recruiting other such women for the democratic process to be applied literally in the end. These visually impaired women will form the pressure group at the level of the organization and hence in the community to ensure the best education for visually impaired girls and women.
- Establishing channels through joint committees between the organization of the blind and the Ministry of Education in the country concerned to

ensure the input of the visually impaired in planning, monitoring and implementing any inclusive education program related to integrating visually impaired girls.

- Establishing resource centers all over the country with a close connection to the organization of the blind to offer the best services to the target group. These resource centers will carry out the mission of ensuring the best application and implementation of the integration of visually impaired girls within regular schools under the system of inclusive education. These centers would play the following roles:
  - Working in close connection with the organization of the blind, which, after recruiting women members is to transfer them to these centers where they can receive psychological consultancy and support. The psychologist in this resource center will help the visually impaired female to gain self-confidence and belief in her abilities. She will be enlightened about how to accept herself as a female and then as a blind female. She is to be prepared psychologically to face all the components of integration into regular school. She will be equipped with the psychological tools that will enable her to struggle and be patient until she gains her basic right to education. The visually impaired girl must realize that in addition to the psychological tools there are educational and rehabilitation ones which she has to acquire to achieve equality with her female friends. She has to learn the techniques of using the white cane to be independent with regard to mobility. She will understand that by using the white cane she will go to school alone, visit her friends and run her life freely like any sighted person. She will like the fact that she will have her own private life. She will also undergo training for daily living skills. These skills will deepen her concept of self. She is to learn how to take care of herself as a female whose body requires special care. Besides taking care of herself she is to take care of her home by being a source of help to the family. In this way she will gain respect and acceptance from her family members. She is to learn Braille, which is the means and the vehicle to literacy. Our visually impaired girl is also to learn how to deal with all kinds of abuses – whether verbal or physical. More than that, she is to receive lessons on sex education to confront the world as a female.
  - Partially sighted girls/women and those threatened with losing their sight can also benefit from this center as they can receive social and psychological support. The visually impaired female is now ready to face the outside world, the world that is unknown to her, but she at least has an idea about it and has the tools to deal with its realities.

- This center – in cooperation with the organization of the blind – is to approach the families of the visually impaired girls through social workers and visually impaired women whose existence on the team would convince the families to believe in the abilities of their girls as a concrete example if a successful visually impaired woman is present. The process is to take place through visits, seminars, lectures and training workshops. The families of the visually impaired females are to be involved in the process of rehabilitation. This strategy will grant the rehabilitation process strength and sustainability. Many visually impaired females in the Arab world were trained to use the white cane, but they have never utilized this training as their families are in total rejection of such a practice. This is attributed to the fact that they were not involved in the process from the beginning.
- The resource center we are referring to is to train the teachers working with visually impaired girls before integration and after it. The training must be comprehensive and continuous. The classroom teacher must be in close contact with the resource center to sort out any problem that arises. The training must comprise of basic blindness issues. The classroom teacher is to be supported by the visiting teacher and the consultant.
- It is the responsibility of the resource center to provide the necessary equipment and the curricula adapted into the proper format, whether Braille or large print. This is not all, as all educational means must be supplied by this center. A Braille library would also be important for literacy. This center will not be for serving visually impaired females only so it would be realistic if gender issues were taken into consideration – especially in certain cultures where mixing with males is not common. A separate place for girls to get training, to read, or to chat with their friends would be beneficial for families who would otherwise not allow their visually impaired girls to visit this center.
- This center is to coordinate with the organization of the blind on how to disseminate knowledge and information to the society regarding blindness, its nature and capacities. This role is of utmost importance to visually impaired females who could suffer from the discriminatory attitudes and the misconceptions of society about their abilities and potentials.

This paper is not written to reject the inclusive education system as an ideology, but to highlight its destructiveness on visually impaired girls in case it is not carefully and properly planned.

# Inclusion at Al-Ahliyah School: Varying Degrees of Success

## ■ Najla Hamadeh

Ex-Principal of Al-Ahliyah School and a member of its Board of Trustees

Al-Ahliyah School, established by Mary Kassab in 1916, was certainly a pioneer in implementing inclusion. Al-Ahliyah's attempts at various forms of inclusion started at the beginning of the sixties, and are still going on, with varying levels of success, for a variety of special needs of a physical and mental nature.

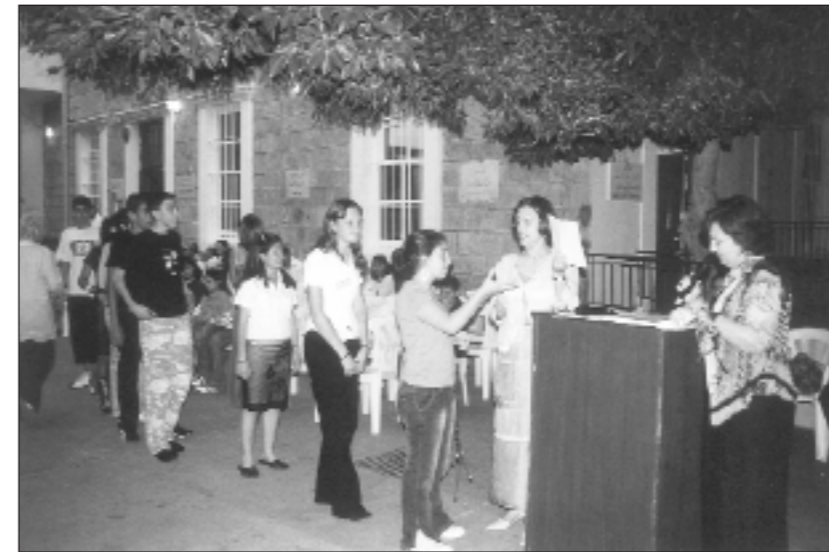
That inclusion should take place at Al-Ahliyah was very natural and even inevitable since its mission has always stressed the value of humanity, the equal rights of all, and the importance of encouragement and of the nurturing of self-worth. It is an institution that strongly believes in giving each individual the opportunity to lead a dignified, fulfilled and productive life.

Al-Ahliyah heralded several changes in society, including harboring on its campus the launching of the Lebanese Academy for Art and the teaching of law in Arabic for the first time in Lebanon. Besides, Al-Ahliyah fearlessly and energetically embraced change with its pioneering work on inclusion, long before the government and other private institutions recognized the need to do something for people with learning disabilities.

Al-Ahliyah's various attempts at inclusion catered to the following groups of needy students:

### Blind Students

At the beginning of the sixties, Al-Ahliyah Girls' College, as it was called then, took in, at the intermediate level, two blind students: Shams Inati (now a full Professor at the University of Pennsylvania) and Mohammad Hassan. Since enrollment of boys beyond the elementary level was not practiced at that time at Al-Ahliyah, an exception was made for Mohammad's sake by the principal, Wadad Al-Makdisi Cortas. Cortas was known for upholding humane targets over and above abiding by the rules. At that time, the only other school in the area that accepted blind students was the British Lebanese Training College (BLTC) of the English Mission. Braille was not available, and students had to learn outside the classroom only by means of other students reading to them or writing down what they dictated, whether it was homework, an essay or an exam. Leila Fawwaz described to me how Shams, who was also a boarder at the school used to solve problems in geometry. She used to ask Ms. Fawwaz to draw the required figure, then bisect a line, or whatever the need may be, according to the specific problem, until she would reach the solution. Ms. Fawwaz told me how Shams once calculated mentally the square root of a number in a shorter interval than it took the teacher to calculate on the blackboard!



Dr. Najla Hamadeh, Principal of Al-Ahliyah School distributing degree during a graduation ceremony

Since the sixties, Al-Ahliyah has continued to accept blind students in its classes. In 2003, it had eleven such students, and in 2004 five of Al-Ahliyah's students who passed the government exams were blind. Three of them matriculated in the Baccalaureate and two in the Brevets degrees. The Lebanese government started accommodating the blind in official exams since 1974, for the Brevets, and since 1981 for the Baccalaureate. Thus, Al-Ahliyah's attempts to accommodate blind students and attend to their educational needs predates that of the Lebanese government by a decade and a half.

In taking care of the special needs of blind students at the intermediate and secondary levels, Al-Ahliyah has been cooperating, since 1960, with the Lebanese School for the Blind and Deaf at Baabda. Moreover in 1998 Al-Ahliyah started cooperating with the Youth Association for the Blind in order to accommodate younger blind students. The Baabda School and the Youth Association help by typing textbooks in Braille and by holding workshops to instruct teachers on methods needed for the inclusion of the blind in the classroom. For example, the teachers are instructed to articulate clearly and are asked to say out loud everything they write on the board. The school at Baabda also provides evening classes to drill higher level blind students in math and science. The regular student-body of Al-Ahliyah shows great willingness and even eagerness to help their blind colleagues; and friendship between seeing and blind students seems to be spontaneous and natural. Generally, blind students at Al-Ahliyah are very independent. Some of them are as fast and at ease as other students in going up and down the numerous staircases of the school. Several of them are honors students.

This year, Al-Ahliyah acquired, through a donation by USAID – Lebanon, a Braille lite machine and printer. This machine will enable the blind students to access the internet and download Braille-typed material that they can read. Moreover, the students can have the material read to them by means of the voice system of the machine.

### Physical Handicaps, other than Blindness

In 2005 Al-Ahliyah added ramps and an elevator to accommodate for students and teachers with motor handicaps. Currently one teacher is in need, and we hope that eventually we will have a success story with physically disabled students, alongside the one we are

very proud of where blind students are concerned.

### Psychotic Students

In the mid-sixties, Dr. Manoukian, the head of the main mental hospital of Lebanon (Asfourieh) at the time, suggested to the Principal, Mrs. Cortas, that some psychotic patients who were of an age and disposition to learn be admitted to Al-Ahliyah. She readily accepted. The number of these students was very limited. Ms. Fawwaz remembers administering the prescribed daily medication to a beautiful Iranian girl, who was an exceptionally gifted student. The girl behaved and interacted with others as a normal student. Her only out of the ordinary behavior was her being inordinately unhappy, weeping and sulking whenever she got less than perfect grades!

More recent attempts at the inclusion of students who turned out to be psychotic or severely neurotic were far from successful. The toll on those who work at Al-Ahliyah and on other students was too heavy for the school to bear. Hence, Al-Ahliyah no longer accepts such students.

### Mentally Retarded Students

In the eighties, the Lebanese School for the Mentally Retarded (now renamed The School for Special Education), asked to have some of its students and teachers use Al-Ahliyah campus, so that these students may get to interact with regular students during recess and in physical education classes, as well as during trips and other activities. In harmony with Al-Ahliyah's policy in support of inclusion, the request was granted.

This form of inclusion was only mildly successful, allowing regular and retarded students to interact: They sometimes played basket ball together or held conversations in

the courtyard. However, the presence of these children was also problematic for Al-Ahliyah, especially due to the values and attitudes that prevail in Lebanese society.

This experience taught us that children require to have their social and humane awareness raised, at home and in school to a high level, before they may become willing to have the patience and tolerance to befriend, or interact with, children much slower mentally than themselves. In Lebanon, people are often encouraged to be aggressive and selfish. They are rarely taught to be considerate of others, especially those with needs different than their own. This is clearly seen in attitudes in driving as well as in the maltreatment of foreign domestic workers.

Some regular students and many parents did not like the presence of the retarded students at the same school as themselves or their children. Some parents of very young children considered the presence of retarded children to constitute a threat to the safety of their children. One family removed its children from school for this reason.

In the spring of 2005, the Board of Trustees of Al-Ahliyah School voted to stop this attempt at inclusion, especially since space allocated on campus was needed after Al-Ahliyah lost its preschool building to Solidere.

#### **Students with Special Needs**

In 2000, Al-Ahliyah started a Special Needs Department to service students with dyslexia or with attention deficit and/or hyper-activity and other such characteristics that pose learning problems. At the outset, it accepted some students with Down Syndrome or below average IQ. By 2003, it became clear that only mild special needs of those who are not below average intelligence are being tolerated by the school society and significantly helped by the program. Today, Al-Ahliyah accepts students with special learning needs provided they are not below average intelligence; and it does not accept more than two such students in every class.

Most of the students with special learning needs are included within the regular classes most of the time, with a special-needs teacher helping them within the classroom. Often the special needs program modifies the lesson of such students, shortening the assignments or simplifying the concepts. Sometimes, the student is taken out of class to be given private lessons tailored to his/her needs. Also often these students take their exams in the Resource Room, with a teacher supervising every student, to help them focus and, sometimes, to explain the questions and directions.

The outcome of this program to accommodate students with special learning needs has been very encouraging, educationally and otherwise. Many students who were

unable to read or to do math overcame their difficulties and became good students. In two cases, students with severe dyslexia, who will never learn to read and write, are found to have higher than average comprehension capability. They are absorbing the information that other students are getting, only in their case the learning relies on oral rather than written instruction.

The only problem with the program is the high financial cost, which is a big drain on the school budget. We are in the process of raising the fees of students with special needs to cut down the losses. But often we have the problem of needy children whose parents are unable to meet the cost.

#### **Conclusion**

Al-Ahliyah's extensive experience with various forms of inclusion indicates that inclusion is hardest in the cases of mentally retarded and extremely hyperactive individuals. Mental slowness and physical over-activity seem to be obstacles to interaction with other students, since the latter seem to be unwilling to be patient enough or tolerant enough to deal with people different from themselves.

Physical handicaps and special learning needs that do not interfere with the ability of comprehension or with social behavior do not seem to cause any discouraging problems. Where social integration of the blind is concerned, Al-Ahliyah's experience has been very encouraging. It has succeeded in providing blind students with the chance to get educated within regular environment and hence in preparing them for living in society and in dispelling any anxiety they may have concerning facing the outside world. It has also succeeded in enhancing and accelerating maturity and sympathy towards others in regular students. This experience has been a dose of humanity, wisdom and joy for all concerned.

Like everything having to do with human behavior, inclusion depends to a large extent on the individuals concerned, whether they are the ones with special needs or the ones who have to learn to cater to, tolerate or befriend them. A retarded child endowed with some charm and possessing relatively adequate social skills is easier to include among regular children. People who have compassion, patience and a sense of duty are more likely to spend time and effort in dealing with colleagues with special needs. Last but not least, a society that values care and compassion more than selfishness and success by the fastest or any means is more likely to succeed at attempts of inclusion. In so far as competition and personal and material success rule the Lebanese scene, Lebanon does not seem to be especially equipped for inclusion. Maybe the remnants of village, tribal as well as religious values are capable of providing some basis for successful inclusion. In post-modern societies, it is the civic and humanitarian values that are on the side of inclusion.

# Seeing Clearly Under Occupation

■ Laila Atshan

Psychosocial Consultant, UNICEF, Palestine

No one can escape the suffocation of occupation. It denies innate human freedoms and imposes a state of unnatural uncertainty in the unconscious self. Each citizen of an occupied society suffers the same deprivations and dependence on the caprice of the occupier; yet each frets and reacts with her own patterns of frustration which affect her self-consciousness and her perceptions.

Blindness imposes similar restrictions on basic freedoms and self-consciousness. One wants to go places, to see and to understand the wider world from which one is barred, but cannot without assistance. One is dependant on others and therefore lost in a world of uncertainty where most decisions are in the hands of others. This is contrary to the natural instincts and feelings of one's unconscious birthright – just as one might will, as of one's nature, to walk, and find one is paralyzed.

The world is threatening to everyone – except perhaps to an ignorant Buddha in the artificial shelter of his palace grounds. Men are obliged to participate in the uncertainties and vagaries of this world with as much autonomy as each can establish among themselves. But women are very much at the mercy of men's respect or disrespect, assistance and co-operation or abuse. Women have to

accustom themselves to a world more dangerous than that of men, one which sets greater real and psychological limits. Women's psychosocial identity and situation is different from that of men. A woman grows up under a formalized occupation in which greater informal and random threats and limitations to instinctive impulses of personal freedom lurk among the uncertainties of limited autonomy. How much more perplexing and difficult life is for a blind woman living in a society under occupation by an alien and unfriendly nation.

Evolving consciousness in the blind world of my youth was fraught with uncertainties, fears, bogies and self-doubts. Poor and painful feelings about myself seemed to have had no limit. But when there seem to be no visible means of support, so to say, one is definitely thrown back on one's own resources. I was forced to take a conscious decision to work on what strengths I had to develop myself, a self that could handle its uncontrolled feelings and, therefore, face the world. Only when I took this step was I able to feel like a whole, albeit faltering, person. I think I would describe the worst feelings as ranging between being intimidated and angry.

With occupation I went through similar stages of uncer-

tainty and frustration, acutely. I felt like a resentful victim not missing an opportunity to pick a fight with occupation soldiers at every encounter. But even this thundercloud had its silver lining. The realization of the true self comes with spontaneous feelings and the experiences into which they throw the blind traveler on this dark journey. "Know thyself" as the Temple at Delphi told the world. That is the goal of life, the completeness which gives courage, the understanding of one's limitations, and one's strengths that open the understanding of experience.

With a new interest and confidence I began to benefit from social contact and particularly from encounters with the occupation authorities. From the time of my taking stock of my situation I also gained accumulated revelations about others. They were encounters of the real kind, at the existential human level. Do you wonder that I have made a career as a therapist and educator?

As you may know, the blind have an acute sense of hearing. They are obliged to focus simply and directly on the heart of every situation without distractions. They develop perception of the subtle nuances of voice and sound. Have you ever consciously decided to ignore the meaning of words spoken and focused entirely on the emotions? Voices send clear emotional messages: "I am lonely... no one hears me... you will do what I tell you..." They send messages of affection, indifference, content, despair, concern, in a never ending sub-dialogue of sentient humanity. Can't you hear? Can't you hear your sister and your brother calling you?

I have learned to listen to the voices of humanity around me and they are not saying what their words say. Between the imperatives and the emotional truth of

everyday human contact life is perverted by political considerations that have absurd and artificial importance of their own. As a blind person I am not distracted by the cosmology of these political and, dare I say it, religious and social constructs. Although I have lots of time to colate information that comes to me about them they are only sandcastles over which children fight their imaginary wars while I, like their parents, see only the reality of the children themselves. I fancy myself as a military doctor bound by his Hippocratic Oath and the imperative of his life and death world, who would order soldiers that have come for his patient out of the tent of his field hospital.

Alone in my flat at night I am afraid when shooting breaks out nearby. I am worried about disrespect at checkpoints. Although blind I am aware of the randomness of the layout of checkpoints, the boredom and capriciousness of the occupiers manning them, the real and the simply vexatious delays, the formal and the emotional exchanges between occupier and occupied, and the rancor and bad feelings, the blighted life felt by each in every encounter. I am aware of roles imposed by the accident of birth, the vanities of tribes, the evil inventions of religious and political doctrine and the puppets thereof who ridiculously claim monopoly of God, power and truth, alien to the true nature and personalities of humanity.

Yes, occupation forces greater care and concern for the ordinary hopes of humanity in the real world. At times I despair, but it is a great joy to take part in life with whatever troubles it brings and sometimes because of them.

As a blind woman existing under occupation I am obliged to see.

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# The Life Experiences of Twenty-One Women who Challenged Disability

■ Jahda Abou Khalil

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Studies related to disability in the Arab world are still limited and studies concerned with the status of disabled women are nearly non-existent. In order to fill the void I have conducted research work covering the experiences of 21 women with disability in seven Arab countries. By analyzing the living history of these women the study aims at deciphering the actual life conditions of women with disability in the Arab world. The objective is to highlight the areas of oppression and opportunities available to disabled Arab women in comparison with women with disability worldwide.

The study aims at enriching other people's awareness of this issue through unveiling the factual conditions of disabled women in the Arab region. It also aims at obliterating all misconceptions about them. For this reason, the study intends to spread knowledge about this matter to a wider audience who should know about the potentials and capacities of these women.

This study was conducted in November 2001. The research commences by touching on women writers who depicted the conditions of disabled women, and how other women activists view them. Discussions also tackled some literary works about this issue written by dis-

abled women who are quite active and concerned about this matter. These women were able to stir up the issue of the disabled woman and nudge it to attention.

The study tackles the experiences of 21 disabled women in Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Twelve of these women suffer from physical disability, one woman suffers from a hearing problem, another suffers a compound disability (blindness and mobility), and the other seven women are blind.

The research also included the various aspects of these women's lives and emphasized the most striking challenges and complexities they have encountered, as well as the ways they adopted to confront and overcome these obstacles. Also mentioned are the times of successful achievements, and those of casual failures. The research names those who offered assistance and support to these disabled women, knowing that some of them never got any aid, yet managed to attain prominent posts through their own potential.

The first section of the study presents synopses of interviews held with the above-mentioned women wherein they relate their experiences. The second section contains

the synthesis of the conclusions reached by the research as well as a display of the results of the questionnaires distributed to disabled women, followed by the final conclusions of the research.

**Case 1: Ramona Sfeir, Lebanon**

She suffers from an obscure malfunction in her immune system, which led to damaging her muscles. What attracts our attention in Ramona's case is her philosophy regarding her disability, which led her to discover how to benefit from her situation and build up herself as a citizen with rights and duties. For that reason, Ramona decided either to be or not to be, and eventually, she refused to equate her existence to her non-existence. She longed to leave behind a positive trace in this life, and that was the aim that urged her not to surrender. Ramona's experience taught her to be fully aware, and to understand that a disabled child is not responsible for his disability, and that it is essential that every family should train their children to respect all disabled persons. Ramona's pure character is revealed through her incessant strife. She says that her spirit will keep on growing until it outgrows this tight shirt and tears it to elevate and roam in the realm of the unlimited spirit where there is no grief, sighing, or pain.

**Case 2: Ibtisam Abatha, Egypt**

Her case reveals to us her ability to confront difficulties probably because she became blind during her teenage years. She finished her studies at the University of Cairo – Division of Philosophy and Psychology. Ibtisam views others with an eye of love and respect because she considers that a human being is not the sole fabricator of himself, but his circumstances place him in one mood or another. She feels that she possesses the ability to succeed and bear responsibility, and considers that life has given her more than she deserves. This feeling is attributed to her faith in God who gives people more than they deserve. Ibtisam also considers that her husband played an essential role in her life since he was always there to participate in her mental development and family construction.

**Case 3: Omaima Abu Shuwsha, Palestine**

She suffers from compound disability: visual and mobility. In spite of her disability her parents helped her to overcome her situation. She has a Degree in Special Education and Psychology. She is also a committed activist in promoting and caring for disability rights as she believes that this is a case that she has to defend. Omaima's disability

contributed to her failure and suffering in love relations. Her lover did not adopt a protective attitude about his beloved, which left her with a deep wound.

**Case 4: Jammala Al-Bidany, Yemen**

She holds a Diploma in Disability. She is polio victim, but worse, she suffered from her parents' neglect and carelessness about her health; however, her grandmother looked after her. Jammala's father's harsh behavior affected her life since he did not act toward her as a loving, caring father, nor did her brothers, who did not manifest any brotherly bond regarding her. Consequently, Jammala had to start work at the age of 15, which aided in overcoming some obstacles about her disability. She also worked arduously in looking for disabled persons who are rejected in their homes, and helped in getting them out of that situation. She even defended the right of the disabled to learn, and played a major role in getting the authorities to issue a decree in 1999-2000 protecting this right. She wishes to be a mother with no limits and be responsible for every disabled child. As for her ambitions, Jammala dreams of becoming a member of parliament in order for her to defend the cause of the marginalized disabled people.

**Case 5: Rola El-Helou, Lebanon**

She suffers from paraplegia. She holds a university Degree in Arabic Language and Literature. Rola dealt with her disability with full confidence and acceptance owing to the ample assistance she received from her parents. Her sister and brothers also accepted her case and helped her. This overwhelming support armed her with consistent courage and the ability to confront her reality since she believes that he who tries to forget reality is a weak person, whereas the one who accepts it is strong. Assertiveness found its way to her so as not to seclude herself in the corner, and she adopted the motto: "I will destroy anyone who tries to destroy me." Rola is obviously independent because she makes her decisions by herself. She faced difficulties when she tried to enter the Lebanese University for there were no building facilities or equipment especially designed for disabled persons. However, with her friends' assistance she overcame these difficulties. Rola played an effective role in rehabilitating and furnishing the UNESCO Palace. Her ambition is to write a poetry book. Rola failed in her love life since, as she put it, her disability pushes guys away. However, she never gives up and believes that through courage and audacity she can

attain her goals, and that through her mind and intelligence she can achieve a great deal. Her motto in life is: "I need the others as much as the others need me."

**Case 6: Rowaida Diab, Palestine**

She suffers from infantile paralysis/ polio. She holds a Degree in Accounting and Business Administration. Rowaida faced problems with the school equipment and building facilities. She suffered from the hatred of some teachers who could not understand her situation. Rola also suffered from other people's opinion about her despite her parents' consistent encouragement. Since she is remarkably unswerving and hardworking, Rola established fruitful contacts with prominent institutions. On the love side of her life, Rola failed, and consequently did not get married to the one she wanted, and so she marked that as one of her failures in life. Her ambition has no ceiling. Finishing her studies tops all her priorities in life, and this prompts her to progress.

**Case 7: Rima al-Khatib, Lebanon**

She is deaf, but her parents accepted and dealt with her situation with tender loving care. In The Institute for Audio Phonetique Reeducation (IRAP), Rima found herself in her second home and with a bigger family. Her disability created no hurdle for her as she managed to become a mother of two girls and one boy. Rima appears to be very well integrated yet she cannot see herself outside the world of the deaf. She is married to a hearing person and instead of taking her to his world he was driven to hers.

**Case 8: Saiida Housny, Egypt**

She is blind and holds a Ph.D. in History. What is unique about her case is that despite remaining illiterate until the age of 16, Saiida succeeded in attaining the highest degrees, which reveals her struggle and persistence. She did not fall for any potential lover because she poured her heart into her education, and so refused to burden herself with love and all its nightmares. Her greatest love was devoted to her scientific achievement and her Ph.D. Saiida encountered difficulties with reading and writing, and transportation, but she managed to overcome all these with the assistance of others.

**Case 9: Sana' Kawly, Syria**

She is a polio victim. She holds a Degree in Biology, and she also studied art on her own. During her stay in hospital for treatment she suffered health problems which augmented her psy-

chological suffering. Sana' fell in love with a painter for 16 years, but she never got married to him. He made her endure beyond limits, which led her into a psychological crisis. Now Sana' lives a psychologically stable life with her husband. She sometimes denies her disability as she feels it is shackling her.

**Case 10: Sawsan Shalaby, Jordan**

She suffers from infantile paralysis. She holds a Diploma in Nursing. The fact that she is a disabled woman bothered her to a great extent, but she then overcame it with the belief that with her will, she could achieve any goal. Sawsan never felt love towards her mother who used to differentiate her from her brothers. Her ability to overcome her handicap is quite obvious in her marriage to a disabled young man in a wheel chair. Sawsan is now a mother of four children.

**Case 11: Sabah Hreish, Yemen**

She became blind at the age of 19. She believes that her blindness is a divine act since she was able to get rid of her previous, oppressive, tyrant husband. Sabah's disability deprived her of reading, which she always loved, but with the assistance of her friends, she was later able to read and write in Braille. Sabah faced a basic difficulty with her instructor at the university when he forbade her to continue her studies as he thought that she was unable to do so; but nothing is impossible for a persistent person such as Sabah who is still continuing her studies in Psychology. The blindness she suffered from has turned into light through her new marriage and the child she is expecting.

**Case 12: Aida Al-Shaishany, Jordan**

She suffers from quadriplegia. She is a clerk at the Ministry of Labor in Jordan. Aida used to feel that she had been a burden to her family, but her family exerted all effort to encourage her and help her restore her ambitions in life. She got married to a disabled person, but then got divorced. Becoming an introvert nourished her belief that she could live on her own, and she did. She lived alone, drove her own car, and got her own job.

**Case 13: Azza Mohammad Ali, Egypt**

She suffers from motor cerebral palsy. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature. Azza was deprived of her mother owing to her parents' divorce. She did not have the chance to establish good relations with them. She failed to get married and have a family, and is now trying to compensate through

working with children whom she loves as though they were her own.

**Case 14: Ghada Hasan, Jordan**

She is blind, and holds a Master's Degree in English Literature. Despite her disability, Ghada does not feel she had a different childhood. She did everything children do with the help of her parents. Ghada loves challenges and adventures, and she believes that it is her duty to work on altering other people's attitudes. She adopted challenge as a principle not a personal attitude. Ghada encountered various forms of challenge and attitudes, but she always proved to others that she possesses high potential and is able to succeed.

**Case 15: Fatima Al-Akel, Yemen**

She is blind, and holds a Degree in Philosophy and a Diploma in Islamic Studies. Fatima scored numerous scientific achievements, and she owes this to her persistence and refusal to surrender to her disability. Being well off has helped her to attain some posts, whereas on the sentimental level, she failed to get committed to the one she wanted. But the idea of motherhood still lingers in her mind. Her father played a major role in her life.

**Case 16: Leila Atshan, Palestine**

She is blind, but her parents' intensive passion helped her overcome her handicap. She holds a Master's Degree in Psychological and Social Sciences. She worked as a psychological and social advisor for immigrants from Denmark. Leila's ambition is to open doors to the Arab world to share humane awareness-raising as this is her vocation. She also feels that it is everyone's duty to work for all human beings.

**Case 17: Mounira Bin Hindi, Bahrain**

The posts that Mounira, a polio victim, has occupied are enough evidence of her ambitions and defiance of her disability. She is the Head of Mobility International in Bahrain and General Manager of Children's Gardens whose aim is to integrate physically disabled children. She is also a member of the Higher Council of the National Institution for Disabled Services, and the Head of the National Committee for Providing Work for the Disabled, and the Vice President of the Arab Organization of Disabled People. She also works as a Coordinator and Training Specialist at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Mounira was entirely supported by her family, which helped enable her to integrate into society despite the

general trend of casting pity on the disabled. The support of Mounira's parents is what stands out in her case.

**Case 18: Najah Al-Awabdy, Syria**

She was born with physical defects. She did not attend school because of her parents who did not accept her disability. She did not even leave home until the age of 15. Her first outing was to partake in her First Communion at church. By this outing, the society around her created a new shock for her, which made her stay home again. She learnt how to read and write by herself, and was able to finish her Brevet degree at home. She is computer literate, but her father did not help her progress in this field despite her love for learning; instead, he cared only for her brothers' education. Najah experienced difficult situations in her private life at home where they viewed her disability as shameful, and thus rejected her case. This has reflected negatively on her educational, social, and love life.

**Case 19: Nada Al-Azzaz from Lebanon**

Though blind, Nada finished her MA in Sociology. She now works at a bank in Lebanon, but her individuality and seclusion in living alone at home prove her willingness to shun society and rely on herself despite being robbed twice. Nada's parents played a vital role by granting her confidence and unlimited freedom. Her mother was her pressing incentive that urged Nada to live her life like any other normal girl.

**Case 20: Nahla Ghandour, Lebanon**

She is a polio victim. Her family treated her with profound care and love, and so she was able to finish a Degree in Computer Science. Now she works as Director of a center for rehabilitating children who suffer from EMC. She is also specialized in occupational therapy for disabled children. Nahla failed in her marriage; her husband used to beat her and swear at her, which augmented her disability problem. This issue had the strongest impact on her, but her son and daughter were her incentive to prove her motherhood. Nahla is an incessant researcher into the affairs of paralyzed children, and she always tries her best to utilize her ambition to improve children's situations.

**Case 21: Heba Hagrass, Egypt**

She suffers from a mobility disability. She holds an MA in Sociology in issues related to gender, disability and marriage. She is a Member of the Executive Committee of the Arab Organization of Disabled People. Heba passed her university peri-

od trying to integrate into the society. She has a successful marriage life with her cousin and they have a son and a daughter. She and her husband view the disabled as human beings, and so succeeded in rearing their children on the sound mentality they have. In this experience, we should not forget the role of Heba's mother in supporting her daughter psychologically, and also her father who supported her educationally. Having the twin support of her parents, Heba could launch herself in this life just like any other girl.

In the second section of this research, the study displays the results of the questionnaires, which posed 15 questions about disabled Arab women. In a conclusive summary it is detected that the signs of empowerment and their elements emerge through the personal ability of each woman to confront persecution added to a combination of factors that help in the success or the failure of the experience.

A collection of factors aided in creating the incentive and empowerment that led to success, and enforced the power of the ego in each of these disabled women. The most effective of those factors are the parents, brothers, sisters, the husband, and the financial status, in addition to the constant care and follow up of organizations of disabled people and rehabilitation institutions.

The research shows that the primary promoter of the drive towards empowerment is the deep feeling inside each disabled person to live with dignity and independence. That constitutes the main driving force to cross over oppression towards self-achievement on both the personal and social levels. Even though this situation is similar in the case of both male and female disabled persons, the case of women with disability in general and in the Arab world in particular poses a stronger challenge of facing the double discrimination of disability and gender.





# Disabled Women and Body Image

## ■ Roula El-Helou

Disability Activist, Lebanon

*I stand in front of the mirror*

*I talk to myself*

*I observe my figure*

*I become immersed in the mirror*

*And I fail to find a soul more beautiful than myself*

*As such, I live in contentment*

*I live with that wheelchair*

*I fail to differentiate between the wheelchair and my body*

*I remain in it with all responsibility*

*Making of my world a reality*

*What do I care if society sees me?*

*I am just a disabled woman*

*I hear them whispering it's the wheelchair that is moving her*

*I shout back freely: it is I who am moving the wheelchair*

### Difficulties Faced by Disabled Women

The disabled woman is faced with a lot of challenges in society. Despite that, she remains strong given that she pays the price first for being a woman and second for being a disabled woman. All she is armed with in this difficult and problematic journey for survival is her self-confidence and self-contentment. The disabled woman's family also plays an important role in building her personality and improving her life conditions. They are responsible for her positive and confident advancement

in society especially during her adolescence, a period that is very critical and delicate. During this phase her personality starts developing, she starts fancying wearing make-up, mingling with friends, going on outings, and trying to attract boys. She might feel the difference between her and "ordinary girls" her age if her parents failed to provide her with the support needed.

The disabled girl leads a very turbulent life during her teens given that she is plagued with very many worries and concerns. These anxieties might develop into a huge barrier if she fails to face up to her reality with its negative and positive aspects. During this period she questions herself endlessly. Will I have a male friend like all other girls? Will I be a wife and mother one day? Will I be responsible for a house and family one day? All these questions and uncertainties might not be answered lest she tried to live her life following the example of "ordinary" girls despite the enormous suffering she might endure and that are imposed by one's reality and Eastern society.

### Disabled Women and Body Image

A disabled woman in our society is more like a heroin in a novel. She lives in a battlefield and struggles on all lev-

els especially when building a serious relationship with a man. She requires a man who understands her not one who sees her as a body. She lives in an extreme struggle given that she knows very well how men view a disabled woman.

Many of the female friends and colleagues I meet complain about and suffer from their failed relations with men who befriend them in order to reach indecent motives. Herein lies the difference between men and women and the way they view love. According to some men, love implies fulfilling one's innermost sexual desires. Besides, men take it for granted that disabled women are in need of satisfying their sexual desires and should feel lucky to experience a sexual relation in spite of their disability. Moreover, men presume that women are unable to detect their true intentions and ulterior motives. Women by nature are very sensitive and emotional; hence, they have to be extremely cautious when entering a relationship. A woman has to constantly test her partner to determine how attached he is to her and how much he loves her. It is imperative to do so given that sexual exploitation is damaging. It might rob her of her self-confidence, mark her for life and make her hold a grudge against the opposite sex.

### Men and the Way they View Disabled Women

Rarely does the idea of getting romantically involved with a disabled woman cross a man's mind given that he is influenced by his society that disregards a disabled woman and undermines her role as wife and mother. Much of the discrimination experienced by disabled women is based on an implicit notion that she is not the same as other women and so cannot be expected to share the same rights and aspirations. This does not imply that men do not fall in love with disabled women. Yet, men are influenced by society and its negative portrayal of disabled women, hence men surrender and accept these false stereotypes at face value. According to parents, disabled women fail to meet the requirements society places on women. They are often perceived as incapable of being "good wives and mothers." Moreover, relatives and friends are convinced that disabled women are incompetent when it comes to equal partnership, running a house and engaging in an intimate and sexual relationship. Here lies the important role the man plays in protecting his partner and defending her. He should serve as her guardian and supporter in shielding her from all the prejudices widespread in society. He has to be convinced of his choice of partner and stand by her.

Mind you, the role the disabled woman has to play is as significant and crucial given that she has to be honest, straightforward and self-confident while trying to explain

to her partner the details and realities surrounding her disability without feeling embarrassed. She shouldn't shy away from explaining how she showers and gets dressed. Moreover, she should be open about her sexual desires, her feelings regarding her body and the manner in which they should make love. She should be honest about the problems they might face while making love such as unexpected urination, inability to control or move one's feet and many of the other problems that might arise, yet do not necessarily stand in the way of fulfilling one's sexual desires.

Men should join forces with their disabled wives and support them. In doing so they sustain and bolster their role as mother and housewife where they equally share their married life and its responsibilities. Subsequently, the way she is viewed by society improves, especially if she conceives, given that Eastern society still places a high value on this.

Last but not least, there are men who are unaware, ignorant and completely oblivious to the plight of disabled women. This category of men disregard disabled women, ignore them totally, feel sorry for them and pity them to an extent that they tend to limit their capabilities and eradicate them. Hence, these men are responsible for a lot of the psychological violence disabled women suffer from. All this is due to men's ignorance of the situation of the disabled and their total rejection of this group of women given that they aspire to get involved with perfect and beautiful women.

### The Way "Ordinary" Women View Disabled Women

Disabled women are stereotyped and discriminated against by "ordinary" women who see themselves as more beautiful, attractive and seductive. Some women use their good looks to try and overshadow disabled women, however, a smart disabled woman is aware of this and refuses to be affected by such a stance. She is armed with ample self-confidence that will allow her to defy and oppose the way she is viewed by "ordinary" women. Hence, she pays attention to her outward appearance and is an equal partner in building society by involving herself in all its aspects, be they political, economic, or social.

### Disabled Women and Sexual Life

The disabled woman in our society is still shy about disclosing her hidden and innermost sexual desires given that her chances of marriage are minimal. This is due to the way she is viewed by men and society. Hence, she is unable to lead a normal life like any "ordinary" women. This creates immense desperation and frustration. The only way she can avoid breaking down and sinking into desperation is through the support she receives from

the people around her. Moreover, disabled women have to cope with the fact that they might never get married or conceive and have to want to continue living despite that. Girls from a very young age start dreaming of getting married and becoming mothers. Most girls play with dolls and pretend that they are their daughters. Given that motherhood is an innate feeling they possess, the role of a mother is a part they long to play in real life.

#### Discrimination between Disabled Women and Men

Society discriminates flagrantly against disabled men and women. That is due to the reign of patriarchal values and standards in the Arab society and their dominance over the feminine society. The effects of patriarchy are blatantly visible in the areas of work and marriage. It is important to note that men also discriminate between "ordinary" women and disabled women. Disabled men, in Eastern society, are more eager to begin a partnership and marry disabled women given that they share the same experiences. Besides, disabled men consider disabled women to be more perfect and stable when it comes to sustaining a relationship.

#### Conclusion

Despite all the discrimination she encounters and in spite of all the prejudices and inequalities she is faced with, the disabled woman relentlessly looks for her rights. The discrimination and violence she is subjected to by non-disabled/disabled men and women as well as by society falls short of depriving her of her dreams and aspirations. Hence, she becomes more like the Mona Lisa where no one knows the secret behind her inner beauty. Besides, she makes of her determination and defiance a righteous sword unconquerable by violence or by darkness.

The isolation and exclusion of disabled women even extends to mainstream women and women's movements, which deny us our rights and identity.

Isolation and confinement based on culture and traditions, attitudes and prejudices often affect disabled women more than men. This isolation of disabled women leads to low self-esteem and negative feelings. Lack of appropriate support services and lack of adequate education result in low economic status, which, in turn, creates dependency on families or care givers.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir



# An Open Discussion: Blind Women and How they Proved their Success in Marriage

■ Roula El-Helou

Because of women's role in building a good nation, and because of our conviction that a disabled woman plays a role in constructing an integrated society, and since the magazine *Asda' al-Mu'aqeen* (Echoes of The Disabled) had a special section on the disabled woman in its previous issues, it has again raised the topic in a special column entitled "They." This column offers a great opportunity to prove the disabled woman's role as an important part of this society which sometimes tries to humiliate and discriminate against her, first because she is a woman, and second because she is disabled. Her dreams are many, and more so her aims, since she still struggles hard to achieve her full rights, especially because she is still searching for her identity in a society which exploits and sees in her nothing but her body.

This is why *Asda' al-Mu'aqeen* wanted to repeat what it had pointed out in its previous issues, i.e. to confirm to all who ignore the truth about the disabled woman that she has more than ever proven to be a good mother, a successful employee and a first rate social activist, since with her intelligence she is able to disprove all that has been said to censure and marginalize her. We will find her effectiveness in special basic nooks and crannies if we help and support her to do away with all the obstacles in her way. In this

article we reveal what is disregarded in order to ascertain the disabled woman's will power, determination and magnanimity, in spite of all the violations she suffers, with the hope of being able to help her eliminate the obstacles in her way. A clear truth faces us after having spoken to three exceptional blind women who have been able to talk to us about their experience objectively and frankly, for they possess a strength and persistence which are rare in a society that judges a woman according to her appearance.

If one studies Mrs. Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili deeply, one finds in her a blind woman who faced the whole of society in order to overcome her blindness. She studied in the Baabda School for the Blind and Deaf, continued her higher education in the Lebanese University where she read Sociology. She then taught English, social studies and science in the Mabarra School and is currently employed in the electricity company. She is married to Ismail al-Tufaili, who is not blind and works at the Ghandour factory in the oil department. She got to know him at the school in Baabda during the Lebanese civil war; they fell in love and married. They have three boys: Ali, Muhammad and Hussein. She goes through her experience of motherhood with pride, of marriage with love and refinement, and of work with energy and liveliness.

Matters do not stop here, for Mrs. Amal Saseen Hajjaj who has been partially sighted since birth, carries us into a dream world she was able to achieve as a woman. She studied in the Baabda School for the Blind and Deaf and pursued her university education at the Lebanese University in Tripoli, studying Law. After a wonderful love affair she married Rashad Hajjaj, who is not blind and whom she met in Egypt. They have one son, Shadi. She is currently a telephone operator in a hospital and her husband is a basket ball trainer who travels between Egypt and Lebanon. What distinguishes Amal is her energy and disorderliness for she is afraid to be left behind by the passage of time before she attains her aims as quickly as possible.

N.D. is a blind woman we interviewed who requested anonymity. In spite of this she was as frank as could be. She studied for two years in a Lebanese university but had to discontinue her studies for economic reasons. She married a non-Lebanese who fell in love with her, but who changed after their marriage. He is about 11 years younger than her and she did not have children because she married at an advanced age. She regrets having married a man endowed with eyesight because of the way he treated her after they got married.

N.D.'s experience is a very rich one, and she is adamant about the violence a disabled woman is exposed to in a male society which subjects her to bitter conditions. Hers is a clear lesson to any blind woman who discovers the negative results of a hasty decision she makes that might turn out to be wrong. Yet she smiles in the face of life, in spite of her troubles.

*Asda' al-Mu'aqeen* interviewed these women about their condition as blind married women who confirmed their role in a society that usually tries to ignore them, and whose courage endeavored to change this general attitude. This dialogue will introduce us into the special world of each of them.

#### Does the blind woman enjoy a normal emotional life in your opinion?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** My experience showed me that the way we treat each other is what makes our emo-

tions grow. The blind woman empathizes strongly especially if the other person is honest and treats her well. I want to say that when the blind woman feels that the man endowed with eyesight treats her objectively, not differentiating between her and any other woman, respects her capacities, knows her personality and blesses her existence, she grows emotionally and can make the proper decisions.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** The blind woman is just like any other woman, expected to use some wisdom and careful consideration in choosing her mate in order to be sure of his feelings and love. This confidence is the result of several experiences and difficult situations which prove to her how honest he is, how attached to her and how far he accepts her condition and is ready to maintain that noble relation which joins a man and a woman.

**N.D.:** I feel that blind women have very strong emotions and desire stability like any other girl with eyesight. We find these emotions in the heart of a woman even if she were not blind. I feel that woman is emotional, that this is part of her being, this is why her emotions might overcome her reason.

#### Did you have unlucky love experiences before your marriage? What did you learn from them?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** I did have a beautiful love affair from which I learnt a lot. I was in love with a blind young man, and my experience with him taught me that one must use her reason before her emotions, for I am against the marriage of two blind people, especially because of the children, unless they are materially well off. If they want to guarantee their independence they will face many problems. I say that reason should come before emotion, and that love which comes from mutual decent treatment after marriage can be more successful.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** Naturally I had such unlucky experiences, just like any other girl, and learnt a lot from them. They helped me to choose my life partner well so as not to make mistakes which would lead to our failure, such as disagreeing in thought and speech. Thank God I chose my husband well. He respects a woman, considers her an ideal human being and endorses her role in her society which often mistreated and abused her.

**N.D.:** I have not had unlucky experiences because I had not been in love before. I used to feel that the feelings of young men with eyesight might not be honest, or prompted by pity. This is why I always refused those with eyesight who asked for my hand. There were also blind men who asked for me in marriage, but I refused them because of my parents who believed it would be difficult

to start a home with a blind man. Although I am married now and have many problems, I am afraid my husband will love me less because he can see, is younger than me and good looking. I am afraid our marriage will come to an end. Fate has unified us and I am afraid fate will part us because of society, although I am sure of his conviction. But he has become less convinced of his choice of a blind woman as a wife. This is apparent in his neglect and inattentiveness.

#### How can a man with eyesight see the girl of his dreams in a blind woman?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** I, personally, was very audacious. From the first time I met him my husband attracted my attention. When we got to know each other we discussed things and this affected my husband, Ismail. My way of talking drew him closer to me and my personality made him love me. Here we started expressing our mutual feelings. A man who is aware searches for what makes a woman, not for her physical appearance, for a person's core is very important and willpower plays an important role. When a man with eyesight thinks like this, he treats a blind woman the way he would treat any other person. It is society that is disabled.

**Amal Saseen:** A man with eyesight cannot see the girl of his dreams in a blind woman unless she proves to him that she is as capable as any other girl, and that she is worthy of him in her understanding of him, her morals and social work, this is besides her physical appearance, her background and her upbringing.

**N.D.:** This depends on the man's personality. I have doubts about a man with eyesight. I married my husband because I wanted to be a mother and have a child. Now I am 45 years old and he is almost 11 years younger than me. I do not want to cheat my reason and my heart. Today I am very frank and afraid to lose my husband, especially since we have been married for a year and a half and I still have not given birth. A child is a strong bond between a woman and a man, although my husband might leave me one day for a younger woman with eyesight.

#### On what did you base yourself when you decided to marry?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** In the beginning I felt it was difficult to take the decision to marry, and was afraid of facing such a resolution, especially since the economic situation plays an important role. When we decided to marry I forgot the economic need, and my husband's support gave me the strength to face the situation. If a man is capable he protects a woman. His strong personality

makes her overcome the difficulties. As an Oriental girl I discussed this marriage with my parents and after they were sure of his honesty they helped me make up my mind. I never felt him to be afraid of facing things, and my love of confronting difficulties, together with other factors, encouraged me to go through with this marriage.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** The trust between us was enough to make us take this decision. I found in Rashad an understanding husband, willing to participate in facing the difficulties of life, capable of fighting and challenging in order for us to marry. Our mutual love was enough to take this important decision.

**N.D.:** All my life I had hoped to have a home and wear a white wedding dress because I wanted to bring up an ideal family. My hope is to have children who will be outstanding in society. But unfortunately I did not wear that white dress, due to problems and a hasty marriage.

#### What were the problems you faced? And how did you overcome them?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** The first problem was Ismail's parents. They did not accept the idea and refused to ask my parents for my hand for fear that their son's marriage would fail and that he would face difficulties. The second problem was that we did not have an independent home.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** I faced a big problem with my parents. They strongly opposed my marrying Rashad because he is Egyptian and of a different religion. They believed that the difference in religion and traditions would kill our marriage. What made them oppose my marriage was their fear for my future with him and their not knowing the society in which I would be living. But I insisted on my wish and managed to convince them that my choice was the right one. My husband's correct behavior also helped and proved to them that he was worthy of their confidence. This made them agree to our marriage, especially since his parents did not disagree at all to their son's wife being blind, and left him to choose freely, fully confident in him. They love me dearly and our relationship is excellent. We are one family now, for better or worse.

**N.D.:** Frankly, I still face problems, especially because his job is not stable. He works in a tile factory, the salary is

*Man is a protection to woman if he is competent.*

*I am sorry I did not marry a blind man who understands my condition.*

very poor, and we live with my parents because of our difficult economic situation. We are financially incapable of having a home of our own and I do not feel that we are independent.

#### Was motherhood a challenge to every refusal you met with?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** For me motherhood in itself was a challenge because I could not bear children for eight years. We underwent treatment, which has nothing to do with my blindness. Concerning my not becoming pregnant did not cause either his parents or mine to bother us. After eight years of treatment we were blessed with our first son Ali. And after him came Muhammad and Hussein. All of which was thanks to God. I did well as a mother, my children do not feel their mother to be different. They are successful in school, and as loving parents we both help in their education.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** Of course after my motherhood those around us became more convinced of our capacity to face with courage and defiance every problem we encounter. We bear the responsibility of our home and our three-year-old son Shadi. I take perfect care of him and do what any mother with eyesight does, for I never have him want for anything a baby

needs. My affection, love and care for his special needs are evidence of my being strong and persevering, and I shall never let him be in need of anything.

Note: N.D. did not become a mother, but her faith in God is strong.

#### How does your independence as a blind woman show in your housekeeping?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** When I was still single my mother trained me in housekeeping, then the Baabda School for the Blind taught me independence. So now I have no difficulties looking after my home. Parents also play a major role in this, not only regarding housekeeping but also all other paths of life. I tidy my house and carry out all my duties, including cooking and shopping on my own.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** I am just like any other married woman who is a mother and works. My duties are many,

but I can accomplish them all because I divide my time: in the morning I prepare my son for kindergarten, tidy the house and prepare the meals. My husband assists me in many things and is very helpful, he never moves something from its place without telling me so that I will not have to bother looking for it. Besides that, I have appliances that facilitate my housework.

**N.D.:** I am a first class housewife and completely independent in my housekeeping, just like any other woman. I carry out my duties perfectly well.

#### How do you visualize the family's future?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** I am sure of myself and have great dreams, I feel that my family life is successful, and hope that my children will thrive in their studies, faith and thoughts. I am optimistic and follow my children's education closely and relentlessly. As regards my relation to my husband it is excellent and nothing will spoil it.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** I am very optimistic, and, God willing, the future will be ours because our married life is stable and built on mutual understanding, support and love. I also have great hopes for my son Shadi since he is intelligent and is used to helping me in spite of his young age.

**N.D.:** Now I am sorry I married a man who sees because I started feeling that he makes a distinction between me and other women, especially when we go out together. When we first got married my husband gave me dreams that disappeared very quickly, for his treatment changed after we got married. He became indifferent in society, we only went out once together after we got married, he does not like to go out with me, and I feel that the only reason he is ashamed of me is my blindness. He does not want me to mix with his friends' wives and keeps me away from them because I am blind. This is the truth and I am sorry I did not marry a blind man who understands my condition because it is his as well.

#### What would you say to blind girls whose love affairs failed?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** I think that a girl fails if she falls in love with a man who considers her with pity or idealistically. If a man is aware and mature the love affair is bound to succeed.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** I wish that they choose well after carefully studying their companions' personality and their readiness to accept the girls' condition, to support and help their wives face the difficulties of

life's problems. I wish all this before they bind themselves to anyone.

**N.D.:** I advise every blind girl never to marry a man with eyesight because one of these days he will differentiate between her and other women, although some marriages between blind girls and men with eyesight are successful. A woman should bind herself to a suitable man, be sure of his feelings, and not take a hasty decision. This is what happened to me and I still suffer greatly from my husband's neglect.

#### Where do you place yourself today as mother, housewife and working woman?

**Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili:** I coordinate between my duties towards my husband, children, home and work. I hate routine and boredom, for emptiness harms a person and makes him lazier. This is why I enjoy being tired when I obtain a result.

**Amal Saseen Hajjaj:** Since I work outside my home, and am responsible for my house, husband and educating my child, besides my social life, life's pressures and the economic pressures, I feel tired, just like the rest of working wives and mothers. I do not have much time for rest, but I am happy because I find rest with a husband who is understanding and sympathetic.

Note: N.D.'s unstable family life has not permitted her to live as a housewife, and her closed society also prevented her from having contact with the outside world, besides the fact that she was deprived of experiencing motherhood.

This investigation showed experiences which differ from each other, yet we find some similarity between Zeinab and Amal's good relationship with their husbands and society.

Zeinab's long wait before having children was a great challenge to society's expectation of motherhood from every female. Although there is no relation between blindness and not having children quickly, which is God's will, her bearing children was a victory over all the tongues that tried to minimize her role as a blind woman, while others sought to negate her capacity and marginalize her. On the other hand we find that her husband Ismail's decision to marry a blind woman showed a lot of defiance and resolve. He stood by the woman he loved without being influenced by a society which differentiates between people. He faced those obstacles with the strength of the lover who defends his position with an independent and sure mind.

Amal's experience shows her and her husband Rashad's defiance of difference, whether of religion, country or background. They stuck together for better or worse, confronting all the doors that were closed to them during their long love story. All this goes to prove her to be an intelligent person in choosing such an honest husband who never let her down, in spite of her parents' refusing him. Through his respect and confidence in her and her family he proved the progressiveness of the Oriental man who seeks the essence of a woman with love and admiration.

Finally we come to N.D. who failed in her marriage. Her hasty decision in choosing a younger partner, his limited income and their not having children might all have been the reason for the change in his feelings towards this poor woman. But whatever the cause, women in general, and the blind in particular should use their reason before their heart in order to guarantee a respectable life with the person they marry. This woman's suffering is great, but, nevertheless, she is strong in spite of her problems. Her husband continues to impede her psychologically since he refuses to let her out into society, her only companions being the walls of her home, while she is longing to find in her partner a friend, brother, lover and real husband. Yet she still has to face her failed marriage, which has developed her awareness and made her search for future solutions that might lessen her burden.

Whatever the facts, N.D.'s experience will not make us look at the empty half of the glass, but will make us take an obstinate stand in not disparaging the role of the blind woman who succeeded, as was clear in Zeinab and Amal's stories.

"Marriage between a blind woman and a man with eyesight is not easy" is what people say who are surprised to see this happen in reality. But our answer is that it is very easy for a man who is aware, cultured and civilized to see in a woman the saintliness of the mother, the luminosity of the wife, the honesty of the sister and the love of the lover. When this takes place the impossible becomes easy, and the darkness of blindness triumphs over all the ignorance and rejection a blind woman might face.

*I am happy because I find comfort in an understanding husband.*

*"Marriage between a blind woman and a man with eyesight is not easy"*

# Disabled Women in the United Arab Emirates

## ■ Munira bin Hindi

President of Bahrain Mobility International, Bahrain.

When I tried to write about the state of affairs of the disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates, I enquired from myself about the subject before writing a single word, as I am a woman from the area suffering a physical disability since my childhood. Therefore, I am a person who most lives, lives with and feels with the disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates.

I tried to ask myself whether I had ever felt a difference between myself and others since I am disabled in all areas: education, work, family life and finally emotional life. Did being a disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates make me different from any disabled Arab woman? Is there a common denominator between us in spite of the geographical differences between the places in which we live?

I found myself going several years back and retracing my past life, comparing it with what is happening now, that is, between the past and the present, and with what the women's state of affairs was in the United Arab Emirates. The woman used to play a positive role in the life of her family! She used to rock the cradle with her left hand and eliminate the difficulties of life with her right hand! She was the mother who sup-

ported the man, the wife who struggled with him, and even played his role in directing the family affairs during his absence on a trip which would last several months a year. In spite of her being deprived of education she was strong, courageous, adapting to the events in the Gulf and living with them. And when education started spreading in the United Arab Emirates, women started participating in much of it, learning both in the local schools and abroad.

Thus she has been appointed to many posts for decades, specialized in all the difficult scientific fields, and women in the United Arab Emirates managed to become ministers, ambassadors, members of parliament and of the state consultative councils. Naturally, she had to struggle for her cause, break the taboos and overcome all the difficulties. Yet, in the end, she arrived.

Such is the life of a normal woman from the Gulf area, a woman who is not disabled. But what about the disabled woman? Was she able to pass through the phases of life like her sister who is not disabled? Was she able to be part of the educational system and obtain educational and training credentials? Was she able to work and marry? Was she able to integrate in society?

Of course education in the United Arab Emirates was never restricted or limited to teaching disabled women. Ever since beginning their education the disabled, and especially the physically disabled, were mixed with the others. But no plans had been made to overcome the difficulties faced by some of the disabled persons in a number of schools, institutions and universities, and this led to the decline of some of them, especially those who were severely disabled or who were not supported by their families to help them integrate. Blind women, however, were not integrated in schools when education began, so most of them are restricted to reading the Qur'an at home.

Speaking about the other forms of disability, their share of education is close to nil. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, educating disabled women started more than 20 years ago and has overcome all the obstacles that were in the way. The ministries of education have begun to take a new course by establishing administrations specialized in educating those with special needs, caring to completely integrate the disabled persons, whether male or female, regardless of the kind of disability they are suffering from, taking into consideration their needs and capacities. Thus the disabled woman started assuming her positive role in education and eliminating the obstacles she faces. In general, both family and society supported her faith and insistence on her right to live like others.

As a result of this progress, and depending on her educational and training diplomas, she started joining the workforce according to her specialization, just like her non-handicapped sister, with the difference that the disabled woman insists on obtaining the facilities that help and support her in her work. She has succeeded in her

education in spite of the difficulties, and has obtained many positions in all domains. The disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates has participated in social and other fields of work, not hindered by her disability, but facing many difficulties.

Regarding society in general, society in the Gulf area usually has different attitudes towards the disabled persons: some really believe in them and offer them all the support they need; others still believe that the disabled person is constantly in need and requires continuous guardianship. Although this attitude still persists sometimes, it is starting to change, especially among the disabled women themselves.

Regarding the economic side of life, her economic standard has started to improve as a result of her having joined the workforce and her depending wholly on her own income. However, concerning those women who are not working and are from middle class families, the governments of the United Arab Emirates guarantee them a symbolic income sufficient for their needs, besides all the appliances and utensils they need.

The only thing that the disabled woman still suffers from is her right to marry, with no sign of change in this respect. Families and society still regard the disabled woman as an inferior who cannot tackle family life and thus object to her marrying. And if she does marry it would be in spite of the families! Notwithstanding this attitude, we do sometimes see a disabled woman marrying either a disabled or a non-disabled man.

This, in a nutshell, is the state of affairs of the disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates.

### *The protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities is about:*

- *The rights and dignity of all people with or without disability.*
- *The rights to freedom and justice to all people with or without disability.*
- *The confirmation and support that persons with disabilities have the same rights as all other people.*

# Testimony - Morocco

## Fawziyya Ben Taleb

I start by asking a question I have always been asking, which is how to talk about a feeling that is deeper and stronger than any words can express, the feeling of being disabled and that is often aggravated by society which is incapable of accepting a disabled person and have him/her lead a normal life like anyone else?

I was born with deficient sight and spent seven years in hospitals and with doctors to no avail. Finally I was convinced that I had to live my life and accept that this was my fate. When I reached schooling age I found a school for non-disabled children but could not adjust to their methods of teaching, so the doctor advised me to study in a school for the blind. But since I was very young I was not fully aware of all that was going on around me. I entered a boarding school and felt very scared because I had left my family and was with people I did not know. Everything looked strange to me: the people, the methods of reading and writing... Thus my life followed a path that differed from what I had imagined and I found it difficult to adapt. However, in the end I accepted reality and submitted to my fate, otherwise I would have lived with a constant interior conflict.

I went through the elementary, intermediate and high school classes in this school then went on to university where I studied law. In the university I faced another world and other difficulties because I had to search constantly for someone to read and write for me. This was a great burden on me and limited my possibilities. But in spite of these obstacles I managed to succeed in obtaining my degree from law school in International Law. As the poet says: "It is not hope but struggle that makes us attain our aims."

My disability affected my studies. I had wished to study science, but that is impossible for a blind person. My disability also affected my social life since it is difficult to find people who appreciate you as a person caring for nothing but your talents and capacity. It also affected my emotional life, for I find that a disabled girl or woman is marginalized in Arab societies, and is not given the position she deserves since society refuses to give her the chance to prove that she can bear responsibility as well as anyone else. I could not accept my life and was not convinced by it, and this made me think of going in for social work in order to help the blind. Although I have not been long in this field it has been a turning point in my life, for being in touch with several issues has made me see that disability is a double-edged weapon. I have to know how to wield it in order to overcome my weakness without allowing it to overcome me. Disability can also be a source of strength by way of challenge and endurance. I also learnt that no one will value the disabled person unless he values himself by having confidence in his capacities, and that he has to fight for his rights for they will never be offered to him on a plate of gold. In the midst of all these challenges there remains the beacon of will power and hope that brightens our life and creates in it the spirit of continuity and giving in order to attain what we strive for. As the saying goes: "How narrow life would have been had there not been hope." This thought enables me to end this short summary of my life, for it is difficult to recount my whole life experience in one article. Therefore I beg the reader to read between the lines more than what has been written in this paper.

# A Dream Come True

## Rana Hussein

Maha Barghouti is a name Jordanians will remember for the longest time. She was the first and only athlete to grant Jordan its first ever gold medal in an Olympic event in December 2000.

Barghouti's achievement during the Sydney Paralympics in the Wheelchair table tennis competition lifted Jordan's flag waving in Sydney's skies. "I always dreamt of being the one who will lift Jordan's name high in an Olympic event, and thank God my dream came true," Barghouti said.

The 40-year-old champ was also named the Arab Athlete of the Year in 2001 and received the Sharjah Excellence Award for the Handicapped. Barghouti paved her way to the Sydney gold medal by beating players representing Britain, Italy and the USA. In the final she defeated a French woman 21-14, 25-23 to secure the gold medal.

Her nationalism and devotion to her country did not go unrecognized. His Majesty King Abdullah bestowed the Al Hussein Medal of the First Order on Barghouti shortly after returning to Jordan with the gold medal.

The Jordanian champ received similar Royal recognition from HRH Prince Ra'ed Bin Zeid, who heads the Jordan Sports Federation for the Handicapped (JSFH).

In recalling her own experience in the athletic life, Barghouti said sports for those with special needs is not as easy as many think. "There are special equipment and certain set-ups that we need to abide by when we are practising and competing in addition to the need for proper transportation to and from practice," she explained.

Another obstacle athletes with special needs should overcome is the "shame culture," and wrongful beliefs by many families of their handicapped chil-

dren. "Most families feel ashamed that they have handicapped individuals. Others do not care to get their children involved in any activities or invest their money in building their athletic capabilities," she said.

That is why she said she was insisting on winning a gold medal in the Sydney Olympics. "My win was a message for people to get to know the handicapped sports and to encourage other families not to discriminate against their handicapped children and instead to support their youngsters to become involved in sports," she said.

Barghouti, who was dubbed by most local media as the Athlete of the Year in 2000, said she accomplished several international achievements since she began playing table tennis and athletics in 1986.

She clinched silver medal in the table tennis competition during the Special Olympics held in Holland in 1992.

But her greatest achievement was during the 1995 Berlin Special Olympics when she broke the world record in the 200 meter competition by scoring 32.26 seconds, which was .08 less than the old record. "I worked very hard for the 2000 Olympics and I was determined to win the gold medal and I did. "This proved that working hard will give good results for people who believe in themselves and what they are working for," Barghouti said.

In 2002, Jordanians voted Barghouti as Jordan's top sportsperson of the year.

During the award ceremony Barghouti said in an emotional speech: "I stand here tonight, though not on my feet, but by sheer determination, which has been the story of my life... The fight to spread awareness about special needs sports finally paid off... People are finally looking beyond our disability and meriting us on our athletic accomplishments."

# A Personal Experience

Wahi Farouq Louqman

Assistant Professor in the School of Economics and Administration  
Advisor to the Dean of Women Students at King 'Abdel 'Aziz University in Saudi Arabia.

I was born with a disease which appears gradually in the retina, therefore my eyesight grew weaker and weaker. I could not run and play like other children, and could not read except under very strong light. This is why my father photocopied books for me with large letters, and my mother kept helping me to read my lessons. My father also accompanied me on a long trip to Spain, India, China, Europe and America hoping to cure me, but to no avail. Finally, in London, my father was told the bitter truth that his daughter would lose her sight sooner or later, and that it was only a matter of time.

When I reached 14 I lost my eyesight completely. I knew the truth about my illness and tried to prepare myself. I accepted God's will and decided not to live regretting my lost eyesight but to profit from the problem and turn it to my advantage... I had gone through the elementary and middle school at one school, and the kindergarten in Jeddah, where I had adapted to and got used to the place, the people and everything else. But the real change came after that when I had to go on to the secondary classes and was not accepted in the secondary schools I had applied to. The various reasons given for refusing me put my mother and me in a difficult and painful situation, until God sent me a teacher who accepted me in her school. I started to double my efforts in studying, listening to what was being read to me.

When I sat for the first exam I got high grades which made them accept to enroll me as a regular student in the school. After that I enrolled in the literary section and was later chosen as a model student first in the school and later in the whole western district. When I received 89% in the General Secondary Certificate people around me thought that I would stop at that. But I refused and insisted on going on to university. Naturally I knew that my condition would not permit me to choose medicine or engineering, so I wanted to specialize in a branch based on discussion, dialogue and argument, and thus chose law. After graduating from university I wanted to prove myself by acquiring a superior degree and went in for post graduate studies and obtained a Doctorate in Law. My studies were in different countries, so I would go from one country to another and bear all the

difficulties I had to face in order to realize my aim. In studying I would depend on listening to what others would read to me, and this was a source of many difficulties, for it was not easy to find someone to read to me and with whom I could relax. Yet I put up with all those difficulties in order to achieve my aim and not be a passive individual and a useless member of society. Then, too, there was the difficulty of staying in the libraries for postgraduate students that forbid reading aloud in their rooms. But in spite of all these difficulties I decided to defend my MA and then my PhD thesis extemporaneously in front of a great number of people, with each defense lasting several hours.

I personally believe that if a person desires to attain a distinguished scientific and practical level he/she needs a lot of patience and defiance and should always try to make light of the thorns that come his/her way so as not to waver in front of the obstacles he/she faces, no matter how many they be. For will power, determination and belief in destiny can produce miracles. This does not mean that the way was easy and was not wrought with pain and sorrow, but I always tried to ignore them so that they would not stop me from achieving success.

After I had finished my studies I decided to work. This was a new turning point requiring a new defiance because the experience of work differed from my experience during my years of study. Work is a direct contact with others to prove one's self. This I faced still remembering the doctors' failure to treat my case, and the sorrow that overcame my family. Yet God quickly inspired me with a vision and determination, and with the insistence on realizing something that would console me in my future and be a modest price paid for my father's and mother's tears.

In aiming to excel in my studies I had decided to obtain my Doctorate in Law from the Faculty of Law at Cairo University. And having succeeded on this I realized what I had longed for. Thus ended the period I had regarded as difficult and impossible and a period started which was more difficult because it meant going out into society and proving myself outside the realm of studies, and offering what I had learnt so that other students might profit by it.

My search started by looking for an academic job. In 1998 I applied for a teaching post in King 'Abdel 'Aziz University, a firmly-established university many dream of joining. After presenting my degrees and being interviewed by the Dean of Women Students in those days, Dr. Haifa Jamal al-Layl, I was accepted as an unofficial lecturer, to be tested in case I failed. I was faced with a new challenge which I accepted.

I remember the first day at university, the students' surprise at seeing me standing blind before them, I remember the whispers from here and there, the comments that expressed admiration and astonishment. I remained silent until they had all settled down, and then started by saying that when God loves one of His creatures He tests his/her faith by depriving him/her of one of his/her gifts but makes up for it by presenting him/her with another gift. So although I do not see, I can feel every movement around me and know whence it comes. I also hope for mutual respect between us, and now let us start our lesson...

Little by little I gained the students' respect and appreciation, and this drew the attention of the administration which had been observing everything from a distance. This, although I had greatly feared the reaction of the students to a professor who would be giving them a lecture without seeing them. Students at this age differ in character and qualities, as well as in their degree of awareness and culture. Therefore, some might behave in a manner that does not become a university student, or that might harm me or, at least, hurt me. All these things occurred to me while knowing that in the university there are hundreds, even thousands of students from different backgrounds and belonging to various social classes. But at the same time I had an inner feeling that all these fears would disappear and the students would accept the situation with respect and approval.

In fact, this is what happened. So far I have taught more than 3000 students who have all shown me nothing but love, respect and pride, and many of them feel proud to have me as their teacher and consider me an example to be followed. In reality, this gives me an invaluable and priceless happiness. Some students come from other faculties to attend my lectures although they have nothing to do with their specialties, and they are all well mannered. In fact, I am very often ashamed by the excellent way in which the students treat me. The days passed quickly before I became a member of the faculty in King 'Abdel 'Aziz University, enjoying all a professor's rights and benefits and having all her responsibilities. This had been a far aim, and I had achieved it.

Through 'Abdel 'Aziz University I was given the chance to prove myself. The University's support did not stop at that, for I gained the full support and confidence of the Dean of Women Students who was appointed after the term of the previous dean who had appointed me came to an end. She appointed me Legal Advisor to the Women's Sector, not driven by pity or compassion but by a confidence gained with time.

Because I believe that a university professor's role is not limited to the university but goes beyond it to the society to which he/she belongs, I was invited by various parties to give lectures relating to legal problems concerning women. In these lectures I tried to simplify the material so that the women could understand it regardless of their standard of education. Concerning my academic future I started preparing research papers that would help me become an Associate Professor. I have already completed a few that have to do with the legal aspects of electronic commerce due to its increasing importance in modern times, and which I cannot detail now. And I still hope to open an office, offering legal advice to business women, and to establish a high-technology institute for blind girls that would train them from childhood to face their plight and to gain self confidence and participate in building their society.

In fact, the Saudi Kingdom has shown concern for educating those with special needs and has established institutions and schools to teach and train them, whether they be blind or deaf. It has also cared, and still does, to develop the institutions specialized in the mentally disabled. Some of the teaching staff in these institutions are blind teachers who had graduated from them, and some of them had continued their university education and then come back to teach in the institute in which they had been pupils. At the university level the universities accept blind students to pursue their studies in several colleges, though not in all the branches. I hope that one day all the colleges will open all their branches to the blind.

Finally I would like to add that it is deep suffering that gives birth to great dreams, and that it is these dreams that give rise to great hopes. Through the years these dreams and hopes might remain fantasies that are difficult to achieve, and might become illusions that cannot be realized and would lead to frustration and defeat. But those who can transform the dream into reality we are proud of, and when we can convert the squandered powers within ourselves into a great ability of giving which will recuperate the riches of the past and encompass the facts of the present, the future will shine in front of us in order to build our present and our children's future under the auspices of country and bounty.



## Be Independent and Decide Freely

Jahda Abou Khalil

Azza Muhammad Ali\* was born in Cairo in 1950. Disabled from birth because of delivery complications, Azza suffered from brain paralysis and endured poor health throughout her life. She died on December 20th, 2004.

Azza was her parents' only child. They separated when she was two and her guardianship was entrusted to her father. She lived with him until he sent her to boarding school in England where she stayed for nine years. Throughout that period she did not see her mother, not even once. However, she used to see her father once a year. Even though she loved him dearly, she still missed her mother whom she could no longer remember given that she hadn't seen her since she was two. Whenever she asked her father why they divorced he would answer that he would tell her everything when she was older. In England she felt lonely, but this helped her develop an independent personality. She felt happy whenever her father visited her even though his visits lasted a week. After some time abroad she returned to Egypt to live with her father who traveled a lot since he was a consul general.

Azza always asserted that her father treated her very well and took her feelings into consideration. While growing up she often wondered why her father never remarried, and when she asked him, his answer was that he wasn't sure whether she would be upset if he did. Azza explained to him that it wouldn't bother her at all and so after her father got her blessings he remarried.

Although Azza's father didn't change towards her after he remarried – he loved her just the same – her relationship with her stepmother was not an amicable one. Despite the fact that she was unkind to Azza, they both tried to accept each other and get used to living together. Azza lived with her father and his wife for around five years, during which time her stepmother gave birth to two boys, Omar and Ahmad. She confessed that her relation with her brothers wasn't a close one.

Azza recounted that after her first stepbrother was born, her stepmother started encouraging her to contact her mother and visit her. Azza's mother had remarried because the traditions at the time did not encourage a woman to remain unwed. The first time she met her mother was in 1968, and Azza started visiting her once a week thereafter. Azza admitted that on her first visit to her mother she did

not feel that they were related. She affirmed: "The blood that ran in her veins was not the same as mine." She felt a strong estrangement. Azza's mother, on the other hand, admitted that she was very happy to finally meet her daughter after so many years. Yet, she admitted that she did not dare touch her for fear of her leaving and not returning. With time and after repeated visits to her mother, Azza started loving her more and more and they became friends. At first, her stepfather did not accept her and was very nervous around her.

Azza's parents were very supportive when it came to education. She was enrolled in a normal school and both her parents used to help her with her homework. She said that it was thanks to her mother that she learnt Arabic. Azza recounted that while she was bedridden as a result of an operation, her mother brought in a teacher to help her with her Arabic. Moreover, her parents provided her with a domestic worker who used to accompany her to school and remain by her side in case she needed anything.

Azza recounted that her school years in England were completely different to the ones she spent in Egypt. In Egypt she felt completely isolated. Even though her teachers at school were very understanding, treated her well, and gave her the extra time she needed, she still felt different and isolated. At first she did not mix with her classmates and avoided going to the playground. However, thanks to her science teacher, who encouraged her to take part in one of the school trips, she started making friends and participating in activities. Azza's university years were very pleasant. The atmosphere was different and she had an excellent relationship with her colleagues; she never felt discriminated against and made many friends. Azza obtained her first university degree at the age of 26, three years older than the normal age due to her poor health.

At the age of 17 and after Azza started having health problems, she moved in with her mother. She felt it was her duty to look after her daughter following a brain operation that left her half paralyzed. The brain surgery was meant to improve her ability to use her hands but instead of healing them she suffered from hemiplegia. The doctors had not foreseen that the operation would have such results, and she started natural cures in order to regain her capacity to walk, but her hands never regained their mobility.

Her stepfather did not complain about her moving in with them. He accepted the idea because he had no children and considered Azza his daughter. She continued visiting her father after that, spending a day with him every week. He tried very hard to foster a stronger relationship between her and his other children but failed. Azza believed this was her stepmother's fault although she said her brothers loved her in their own way.

Azza worked in several institutions for the disabled before she decided to go for a doctorate degree. When she started working she had many ideas she wanted to put into practice about how to develop and modernize the organizations that deal with the disabled. She was very excited about making a difference and bringing about change but was extremely disappointed because no one was interested in reform. With time Azza got used to the situation. Before she passed away she was teaching English to a group of children with brain paralysis.

An important event in Azza's life was her falling in love with one of her classmates at university. She was 21 at the time and he was her first love. He was gentle and kind to Azza and their relationship was platonic despite the fact that it lasted for five years. Even though they talked about marriage, the relationship ended because he was Christian and wanted to travel to Canada. Azza being Muslim couldn't marry him nor could she leave her mother alone. In Azza's words: "Had he been Muslim I would have married him and traveled with him." After they broke up and he traveled Azza was very miserable. They stayed in touch for a couple of years, yet, given that they had no future together her first love decided to get married. He invited her to his wedding and she attended. It was a difficult experience for Azza. She knew he was bound to get married and she considered it to be his full right but going to the church and seeing him marry another woman was very painful.

After a while she became close to a colleague at work. He was disabled because of a brain injury and had a paralyzed hand and leg. He suffered from denial given that he tried to reject his disability and refused to accept his situation. Azza tried to help him and their friendship developed. At a certain point he asked for her hand in marriage and she accepted on condition that they live with one of their parents given that they both needed help. He refused because he wanted them to be independent. The relationship didn't work out and they stopped dating.

At the age of 38, Azza got engaged to a classmate at university. She decided to take the plunge not out of love but because she felt she had to settle with a man. However,

after she got to know him better she realized that he was unsuitable in a lot of respects. He was very lazy, he refused to work and was expecting Azza to be the sole breadwinner. He lived off the money he received from his brothers and had no intention of changing. Azza ended the relationship after four months and was convinced that marriage without love is bound to fail.

This incident was a big blow to Azza because she could not fulfill her desire to be romantically involved with a man. It made her give up the idea. Azza's view was that it is difficult for an Eastern man to accept a disabled woman even if she is intelligent and successful. All this changes nothing for him. She believed that no matter what a disabled woman achieves in life she will always be stigmatized as a disabled person because what attracts men in this era is not the intellect but a sound body.

After the failure of her engagement Azza knew that the only thing that would help her regain her sanity was organized study. So she decided to prepare for a Ph.D. She obtained a Doctorate in English Literature with Distinction from the American University in Cairo and dedicated it to "All those who find life difficult."

Azza regretted not getting married and was gravely disappointed for not having given the matter more thought. She knew that she would leave this earth unmarried and with no children. She admitted that with age she became more demanding and refused to get married to anyone. She wanted a husband with the qualities she desired in a lifelong partner. Azza managed to compensate for not having children of her own through her work with children. She loved her students and treated them like her own. Moreover, she taught them how to be independent and encouraged them to think for themselves. Azza insisted that the most important thing in life is for a person to be independent and take his/her own decisions.

One of Azza's most painful experiences was dealing with the death of her father. She was greatly affected by his sudden death. Her mother was a great support and helped her overcome the terrible shock. Two years later her stepfather died, but his death did not have the same effect on her. Her mother was the only person able to fill the void left by her father.

### END NOTES

\* This article was written before Azza died on December 20th, 2004.

# Human Rights and Disability Film Festival

■ Myriam Sfeir

On December 3rd, 2004 the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union, (LPHU), in collaboration with various national and foreign associations held its Second Human Rights and Disability Film Festival. The three-day event took place at Estral Theater in Hamra and coincided with the International Day of Disabled Persons. The idea of the festival came about in 2003. The aim was to raise awareness about disability issues and to create a forum to highlight many of the issues facing disabled people.

For its first disability film festival, LPHU collaborated with Amnesty International, Save the Children Sweden and some local and private partners. The two-day festival held at Saint Joseph University was more or less an awareness raising initiative. The idea was to get the public interested in disability issues and get the local media involved in disability and human rights. Most of the films screened in the first festival were foreign – from the United Kingdom and France.

The second film festival, like the previous one, served as a platform to highlight some of the issues facing people with disabilities. Moreover, it strived to emphasize the fact that many of the problems the disabled face are a result of the prejudice and discrimination they encounter rather than disability itself. However, it differed from the first in that college students produced most of the films and documentaries. The British Embassy, Save the Children Sweden, Norwegian People's Aid, as well as Amnesty International sponsored the festival.



The opening ceremony witnessed the launch of the short film *Sawtuna*, or *Our Voice*, prepared and produced by LPHU, the Inclusion Network\* and volunteers. The second and third day of the festival involved film screenings where seven documentaries and films were shown. Moreover, fun games with Lebanese entertainer Tony Baroud were organized to educate children about different disabilities. The last day hosted an award ceremony for best film on human rights, best film on the rights of disabled persons, and best film script.

Lara Shamji, a freelance media designer explained more about the making of the documentary *Our Voice*, and recounted: "Given that I am a freelancer who works on designing visual communication projects for marginalized groups, I contacted LPHU and we worked together on developing a project for the youth because they are the most marginalized in society. We designed the project in collaboration with the Inclusion Network. Shamji continued: "As a freelancer, I try to work with and develop projects for grassroots organizations because I think they are the most well-informed when it comes to disability issues. None of the organizations under the umbrella of the Inclusion Network are institutions, they are mostly parented or run by persons with disabilities and I believe they are the most knowledgeable when talking about disability."

Shamji explained that the project entailed training a target group of 25 young participants, with and without addition-

al needs, on how to use digital media as a platform for voice, empowerment, and capacity building within an inclusive environment. The end result was the documentary *Our Voice*. Shamji stated: "A video project was specifically tailored to encourage the participants to see that they have the skills and the power to tell their own story and be heard. The participants were able to overcome misrepresentation of their cause by showing that they are active players in their own lives and defy stereotypes of passivity in the media."

According to Shamji, the documentary was able to highlight how a group of young people was able to use visual media positively as a form of self-expression. She affirmed: "Given that visual media is the most effective communication tool when it comes to the masses, we felt that it could raise awareness and bring about a positive change. And we succeeded because the participants were able, via the media, to demonstrate their capacities and relay their

thoughts to a wide audience. Bearing in mind that the subjects in the images are often misrepresented in the media, through the documentary *Our Voice* they were able to show their side of the story."

## END NOTES

The Inclusion Network is an informal collective that aims at achieving inclusion within the family, the educational system and society. The Network came about four years ago and groups the various associations representing disabled persons, their parents and specialists with college professors. Among the members of the Inclusion Network are: Association of Parents of Deaf Children in Lebanon, Dyslexia Association, Lebanese Autism Society, Lebanese Down Syndrome Association, Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union, Youth Association of the Blind, as well as partners from the ECD Core Group, Lebanese American University, Lebanese University, Palestinian Disability Forum, Save the Children-Sweden, Saint Joseph University, and UNRWA.

## Short Films and Documentaries Screened

### - Talk

(Dir. Matthew Parkhill, UK 2000, 10 mins)

A young executive wakes to find himself in a world where disability is the norm. As a non-disabled person he has both physical and social barriers to overcome. This film was made by The Disability Rights Commission.

### - Street Play

(Dir. Samar Kanafani with CHAMS and Beirut DC, Lebanon, 2002, 11 mins)

Street Play is a portrait of children creating space for themselves in a city where there is none and inventing their own playground in the street.

### - L'homme de compagnie (The Playmate)

(Dir. Philippe Thomas, France 1996, 7 mins)

A romantic encounter in the street set to the rhythms of samba music.

### - Harvie Krumpet

(Dir. Adam Elliot / AUS 2003 / 20mins)

It is the biography of an ordinary man seemingly cursed with perpetual bad luck.

### - Elie Fayrouz

(Dir. Cynthia Choucair, Lebanon / UAE, 2003, 13 mins)

Elie Darwish has a voice similar to that of famous Lebanese singer Fairuz. The film traces a story of this man with a woman's voice and his life, which is full of love, music, pain, solitude and waiting.

### - Blind Sensations

(Dir. Raina Haig / UK 2001 / 9 mins)

A three-part expressionist film exploring how blind people secure and maintain a sense of personal space.

### - An Independent Life - Disability in Kosovo

(Dir. Andrea Ruffini, Italy 2004, 26 mins)

Disability in Kosovo today: difficulties, prejudices, inter-ethnic problems, social organization. Kosovo is still under the control of UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo), but

many social problems are still there, racism is still alive, and many social questions are still unsolved. The Italian N.G.O. C.i.Ca., with the activity of the "Centre for an independent life", try to help people with disabilities in Peje - PEC to find an autonomy and an identity.

### - Handicap

(Dir. Lewis-Martin Soucy, France 2004, 8 mins)

A tale of seduction where it's not what you say, but how you say it.

### - An Artist's Guide to Schizophrenia documentary

(Dir: David Emerson and Damian Clarke, UK 2002, 29 mins)

Aidan Shingler explores the creative and spiritual dimensions of schizophrenia.

### - Untitled part 3b: (as if) beauty never ends...

(Jayce Salloum, Lebanon/Canada/ 2002/ 11:22 mins)

Part of a work in progress, which features, Abdel Majid, a 1948 refugee in Lebanon, discusses issues of dispossession through an eloquent poem told by the ruins of his house in Palestine where once he was allowed to visit after his first 30 years of being displaced. Ambient sound and images including orchids blooming superimposed over raw footage from post massacre filmings of the 1982 massacre at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

### - Miracle

(Dir. George Homsi/ IESAV USJ/ Lebanon / 2004/ 25 mins)

An ironic, fly-on-the-wall experience of obtaining an American visa when Lebanese had to go to Cyprus or Syria. The story is told through an eclectic mix of local characters that we can all identify with, set in the sterile surroundings of a consulate. How far would you go to get a visa?

### - Happy Day

Adelislam / Morocco / 2003, 17 mins

The Story of Said, 7, who through his work experiences all sorts of maltreatment. *Happy Day* sees Said change from victim to victor.

# The Society Should also be Politically Inclusive

Dr. Nizar Ibrahim

At a workshop organized by The Youth Association of the Blind (YAB) and The Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union (LPHU) from July 13-15, participants examined strategies for advocating an inclusive society for all in which all the citizens have all their rights, even their political ones.

Representatives from Yemen, Jordan and Egypt attended the workshop and worked with speakers from YAB, LPHU, The Lebanese Association for the Democracy of Election (LADE), and *Al-Nahar* Newspaper to discuss the Lebanese experience in the "Haqqi" or "My Right" campaign, a project organized by YAB and LPHU to make the issues of the disabled visible through the election.

The "My Right" campaign worked with those calling for the rights of the disabled and was very successful. The campaign used Lebanon's 2005 parliamentary elections as a platform for advocacy. At the regional workshop ideas were exchanged about the strategies used in "My Right" campaign and the participating countries were able to develop plans to carry out similar projects.

Nizar Ibrahim, the manager of the project, explained the goals and policies of "My Right". He emphasized that YAB and LPHU work for an inclusive society in which marginalization should decrease and in which all the citizens, including those with special needs, have their rights at all levels. The recent elections constituted an important platform for bringing up the issue of the marginalization of people with special needs and for promoting advocacy for their rights at the vocational, educational, and social levels.

The workshop participants discussed the importance of political work in raising the issues of people with special needs, which was at the heart of "My Right" campaign. People with special needs (and all the other social groups,

especially the marginalized ones) must be educated regarding the election process. They must also examine the willingness and seriousness of the election candidates to work for giving the marginalized their rights and developing policies that improve their lives.

Hussam Addanaf, coordinator of "My Right" for the Beirut region, explained that one of the campaign's purposes was to promote such awareness and that to achieve this, "My Right" networked with other associations to address the disabled. The campaign brochure also explained the importance of being politically involved and the specific mechanisms that facilitate this involvement for people with special needs.

The regional "My Right" workshop discussed strategies for working with the media in two different sessions which were conducted by Iman Khaleefeh from LPHU and Ghassan Hajjar from *Al-Nahar* newspaper. Both emphasized the strategies that should be followed by NGOs to involve the media. They stressed the importance of NGOs assigning one person the responsibility of liaising with the media. Knowing whom to contact in each media company, what information to provide about the subject, and how to attract the attention of the person addressed help build a successful relationship with the media.

The regional workshop concluded that "My Right" succeeded in attracting the attention of the media because the campaign formulated a clear message, appointed a person whose responsibility it was to follow up with the media, raised the issues of people with special needs in a concrete way, and made their concerns a hot issue.

The workshop also discussed the importance of establishing a relationship with the political parties in doing advocacy work. Amer Makarem, the President of YAB, con-



ducted this discussion maintaining that working with the political parties assists marginalized groups to form a lobbying power. Waleed Fakherdeen, an activist in LADE, in his discussion of the Lebanese political situation illustrated the need of the marginalized groups to cooperate with the different political parties. The process of creating partners with political groups is a long one and needs commitment, patience and a clear vision. Commitment can start when the NGO assigns one person or a team the responsibility of working with the political groups. This team's work should be based on a clear policy and should have specific demands with which the politicians can empathize, and specific steps to work for these demands.

For example, one of the strategies used in "My Right" campaign was to show the difficulties that people with special needs face during the election through preparing model polling stations and drafting legal articles to solve these problems. The campaign then advocated with different groups to include these articles in the new election law.

It is important too to maintain a distance between your association and the different political groups to establish the credibility of the association as an independent rights movement and not as a politically affiliated one. A clear policy and a clear vision constitute the basis for

good cooperation with other NGOs. The cooperation on many fronts of "My Right" campaign with the Lebanese Association for the Democracy of Election (LADE) illustrates this. Ammar Abbood, the person in charge of training in LADE, stated that although cooperation existed between YAB and LPHU on one side and LADE on another side before the campaign, "My Right" campaign gave this cooperation a strong push. This came about through several steps:

- a. Explaining to LADE the purpose and policy of "My Right" campaign.
- b. Preparing training manuals for the observers and the media that specify what to look for when observing and reporting about the participation of people with special needs in the elections.
- c. Providing LADE with material like the inclusive criteria, the existing law, and the suggested legal articles that deal with the participation of those with special needs in the elections.
- d. Asking LADE for cooperation in specific areas: including the criteria of "My Right" campaign in training the observers and media; including the violations of the rights of people with special needs during the election in LADE's

reports. The strategies used with LADE proved to be successful and can be followed by other NGOs in advocacy campaigns. Ammar Abbood said the impact of cooperating with LADE became clear where the trained observers themselves became aware of the rights of people with special needs to the extent that they included the concerns of this marginalized group regularly in their election reports.

The participants in the regional workshop of "My Right" campaign were highly interactive in raising their concerns. Their questions enriched the discussions in the workshop and made the topics discussed highly beneficial. They expressed their appreciation of what was discussed, highlighting the importance of the model polling stations organized by "My Right" campaign, as discussed by Husain Mruwweh, the project's Nabatiyeh coordinator. The outcome of the workshop was tentative plans for carrying out similar projects in the participating countries. The Lebanese pilot experience laid the grounds for similar experiences in the Middle East.

# "Nobody Represents us better than us"

In the parliamentary elections of June 2005 the Lebanese Council of Disabled People (LCDP) took a major step towards the full participation of people with disability in the political life of the country when it declared the candidacy of three of its members. Such a step opened a new horizon for the disability movement when disability became not only an election issue, but a political power in the campaign too.

To discuss this initiative Al-Raida met Mr. Ibrahim Abdallah the President of LCDP and one of the candidates. Abdallah holds a Master's in Commercial Law from the United States, is President of the Universities League for the Blind, and was recently reelected as a member of the National Committee on Disability Affairs in Lebanon.

**Al-Raida:** What are the main reasons why LCDP participated in the Lebanese parliamentary elections through three of its members?

Ibrahim Abdallah: LCDP had three main objectives for the 2005 parliamentary elections. The first was to ensure the largest possible participation of people with disability in the elections: The more people with disability vote, the better our position to lobby for our rights. The second objective was to push for disability to become part of the political programs of different parties and candidates. The third objective was to encourage disabled people to run in the elections.

If people with disability present their candidacy, we believe that we can succeed in making disability a major societal issue and a serious subject to be dealt with by voters. In addition, if a disabled person were to be elected, it would mean that the disability movement had won a major political power that would ensure a better follow-up of and pressure for the implementation of Law 220 on disability.

**Al-Raida:** What is the importance of the presence of some disabled persons in parliament?

**IA:** Over the years, we have tried to make disability a serious issue for the government to deal with. Unfortunately we were not successful. To begin with the government is not serious in meeting its commitment to the cause – as

required under Law 220. Second, members of parliament do not seem to be interested in putting pressure on the government to meet its obligations according to the Law. The main reason behind this is that the disability movement does not give the impression of being politically strong and hence fails to win the attention of the country's political society. A disabled person as a member of parliament representing the disability movement is a sign of the movement's strength and a political passport for it inside the different Lebanese political and administrative institutions.

**Al-Raida:** We know that there are some members of parliament who are really active in the field of disability and they had their share in the efforts to pass Law 220, what do you think of them? And how do you evaluate the role of the parliament?

**IA:** Yes indeed, we have some friends in the parliament but not too many who are really concerned about disability issues; but as I said they are a minority and they can't change things around for us. The parliament did a great job when it passed Law 220 but unfortunately – and after five years – the parliament has not done what it is supposed to do, namely monitoring the implementation of this Law. So, we have found ourselves far away from the total effective implementation of Law 220 and this is what led us to take such an important initiative.

**Al-Raida:** How do you evaluate the results of your campaign?

**IA:** As you know we succeeded in getting one candidate to run in the elections in the Northern District – Dr. Nawaf Kabbara. He ran as a candidate and as a member in one of the major lists in the region. Even though he didn't win, he was able to secure a large vote of around 64,000. Such a vote is a positive step forward. It is also very encouraging for the future. Unfortunately, we were not able to succeed in getting him elected but we did succeed in putting on record the direct participation of people with disability in the political life of the country and in getting our cause highlighted. I believe that this experience will also encourage disabled people to work together and consider turning themselves into a political voting power that has a serious effect in the elections.

# Diagnosing and Treating Autism

This year, 2005, the Ministry of Social Affairs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia issued *Diagnosing and Treating Autism*, a book by Dr. Tal'at bin Hamza al-Wazna, the General Director of Medical Services and Consultant for Diseases of the Brain and Nerve Rehabilitation. The 111-page book has a list of some of the international scientific societies for autism and a bibliography in Arabic and English at the end. The book is divided into three parts.

First, there is an introductory statement by the Minister of Social Affairs in Saudi Arabia, Dr. Ali bin Ibrahim an-Namla, acquainting the reader with the content of the book, followed by an introduction by the author saying that his book clarifies what the Arabic societies suffer due to the lack of identifying autism and specifying the specialists to treat it, giving a résumé of its contents:

The first chapter is an introduction in which the author mentions the reasons for the difficulty in diagnosing autism. He then gives an historical aperçu of the meaning of autism, and enumerates the reasons for its spread. Following this he describes the disorders of the shadow of autism calling them "The comprehensive disorders of growth."

He describes Asperger's syndrome, which is not detected before four or six years of age, and which is sometimes accompanied by the child being slightly mentally retarded. He mentions the differences between it and autism. He then goes on to describe Wright's Syndrome and how to diagnose it, it being a nervous disease found only in females, and describes the differences between it and autism, and describes the stages through which the girl afflicted with it passes. He then describes the infantile regression and the undetermined generalized develop-

mental disturbance which is called uncharacteristic autism and is the most diagnosed among the general developmental disorders. After this he goes on to show the behavioral problems that draw the attention of the autistic's parents and pertain to his behavior, such as nervousness, and social problems, such as the child's solitary personality. The author also gives an historical aperçu of the criteria for diagnosing autism which clearly shows the difference between one disorder and another. The diagnosis criteria developed by Lorna Wing and Judith Gold are those most commonly used and accepted worldwide at present. As a result of their studies and experiments these two researchers found there were three basic characteristics of autism that appear combined: inadequacy in social interaction, inadequacy in language and speech, inadequacy in imagination. The author explains the criteria for diagnosing autism that are used at present. Perhaps the most influential criteria are those mentioned in the American Psychiatrists Association's catalogue of diagnosis and statistics. The author points out the psychological measurement tools that help diagnose autism at various stages of life. He also describes the multiple specializations standardization which is the ideal standardization in which a number of specialists should participate and which saves a lot of effort, time and money and lessens the possibility of wrong diagnosis, the final diagnosis being that of the psychiatrist. After that the author describes the programs for health rehabilitation and which only aim at lessening the symptoms and behaviors and making up for the absence of the necessary skills for everyday life. He describes the basis for treating and changing the autistic's behavior such as his aggressiveness or his withdrawal, and epilepsy which requires medication, and over activity. The author also mentions the medicines used in the treatment of autism and the advantage of each. After this he describes the educational programs for the autistic which have obtained great progress in training and developing the autistic child's skills and changing his behavior.

In the second chapter entitled "The Centers for Autism" the author describes the building and architectural requirements for these centers. He describes the administrative structure for those working in them, the administrative jobs that are suggested, as well as the technical and health jobs and specializations. He also mentions the procedures and regulations to be accepted in the center for autism, and describes the cases of autism that benefit from the services of the center.

The third and last chapter consists of questions and answers concerning autism, what accompanies it, how widespread it is, the characteristics of an autistic child, and everything pertaining to autism and those that suffer from it.

# Integrating the Disabled in Schools

In December 2004 a book was published on Integrating the Handicapped in Schools written by Professor Geryes Khoury according to an agreement between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the National Committee for the Rights of the Handicapped in Lebanon. The book has 107 pages and is divided into six parts, with a bibliography in both Arabic and English.

The first two parts deal with theoretical and analytical studies, future prospects and the actual and ideal pedagogical specifics.

The first part deals with the reality of integration, in that integration has become a confirmed policy in developed countries, and is a right guaranteed by Lebanese law, as well as by the International Agreement on the Rights of the Handicapped currently being discussed at the United Nations.

In the second part the writer defines the meaning of integration, delineating its nature, types and conditions, drawing on pedagogical definitions on the one hand, and on the leading experiments in the field on the other. He clarifies the way to study integration, and the current experiments in the field in Lebanon.

The third part deals with integrating the blind in the nor-

mal schools in Lebanon, which started sporadically and on a limited scale at the beginning of the sixties, but which increased in the nineties and the present century, taking on three types: integrating the blind by sending them from special schools for the blind to normal schools, then having them return to their special school to study and sleep. The second type is complete integration whereby the blind are sent to a normal school from kindergarten till graduating from high school, having their parents participate directly in this integration. The third type is by integrating a small percentage of sighted pupils in a school for the blind, as applied in the Huda Institute, and which is a unique experiment. This part ends with what is practiced in the Ahliyya School where the blind pupils are integrated according to the first and second types.

The fourth part deals with the integration of the deaf in normal schools, with a detailed account of the pupil Rani Aqqad's experience, and points to the material, logistic and academic burdens this kind of experiment entails. It also describes the experience of two institutions specialized in teaching the deaf by integrating some of their students in normal schools. It also discusses the problems faced by the deaf when they are integrated, the difficulties they have mixing with those who hear, as the deaf Dr. Hussein Isma'il points out.

The fifth part is a detailed account about the integration of those who are handicapped in their movement as practiced in the Forum for the Handicapped in north Lebanon, noting that the problems pertaining to the adaptation of the schools architecturally and technically are not really taken into account in this experiment.

The sixth and last part is a quick overview of the experiments to integrate the mentally handicapped, those with Down's Syndrome and autistic pupils. In spite of this part being short it strongly highlights many of the problems raised by these endeavors, which are academic, material, social and psychological as is clearly shown in the introduction to this part and by what is said by Professor Sami Hammoud, the Director of the Lebanese Committee for Special Education, and by Mrs. Fadia Farah, Head of the Committee of Triple Chromosome 21, and Head of the Lebanese Committee for Autism, Mrs. Arwa Halawi.

