

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

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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

# Opinion

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