

# Women with Disabilities in Lebanon

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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

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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.

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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

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.