

# Series of Panels on Physical, Sensory and Mental Disabilities

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) organized a series of four panel discussions about Disabilities, on the last Wednesday of each month beginning with February, at the Beirut University College's Irwin Hall. *The lectures were funded by the World Rehabilitation Fund, to whom the Institute (IWSAW) and all those concerned extend their sincere thanks.* Each lecture covered one form of disability, respectively: 1) Physical Disabilities, 2) Blindness, 3) mental disabilities, 4) Deafness. The purpose of the lectures was the creation of public awareness about disabled children and people. Speakers discussed the medical aspects; the social and psychological aspects; and the rehabilitation and treatment aspects of the disabilities. They also emphasized the urgent need for expanding special education; specialized personnel and institutions; and promoting awareness and facilities encouraging the participation of the disabled in society. The speakers included heads of specialized local institutions, social workers, specialists, doctors, educators as well as disabled people themselves or their parents who told of how they coped. The lecturers used audio-visual material to illustrate necessary data and procedures.

The first panel discussion of February 26 concentrated on Physical disabilities. The first speaker, Dr. Nazih Muffarij, a neurosurgeon, explained the medical aspects of physical handicaps using audio-visual material to illustrate the various forms of disabilities. Among the four panelists were two social workers who

have had to cope with a physical disability themselves and later became pioneering members and workers in specialized centers. Thus, Miss Nahla Ghandour who suffered from Polio as a child is now an education and therapy specialist. She emphasized psychological and physiotherapy in rehabilitating a physically disabled child. Mr. Hassan War'iyeh, who lost his arms in an accident explained the technical and psychological aspects of rehabilitation related to the installment of artificial limbs. Dr. Moussa Sharafeddine, the moderator, summarized the various discussions and emphasized the importance of dismissing the notion that disabled people are a nuisance and a burden to society. The panelists stressed the importance of a supportive and active role of parents. The need for training and rehabilitation centers was raised calling on the government to take a more efficient role.

The second panel discussion of March 25 concentrated on Blindness. The moderator, Miss Laudie Jurdak, a blind person herself, holds a Master's degree in Mass Communication from Beirut University College and works in the Lebanese School for the Deaf and Blind. Her moderation was characterized by wit and humor in her tales of problems and hardships encountered in society as a result of being a blind person. Mr. Mou'niss Abdel Wahhab, who is blinded from birth, holds a Master's degree in Arabic Literature from the American University of Beirut and teaches at the Huda Institute for the Deaf and Blind in addition to being a member of the

The Friends of the Handicap Association of Tripoli. Mr. Mou'niss emphasized that a blind person's handicap is loss of sight not mental retardation, nor deafness or physical disability, and therefore should not be treated as having all of these handicaps. He offered the audience insights, instructions and advice on how to deal with blind people in public, notably on the street, in restaurants, in social gathering. His discussion was also characterized with wit and humor. Miss Amal Ibrahim, who lost her sight at the age of eight, and now holds a Master's degree in Educational Psychology from the American University of Beirut and works as a principal at the Huda School for the Blind and Deaf, recounted her experience. She noted the difficulties of learning Braille at older ages, the struggles with anger and denial of her condition and her determination to lead a normal and active life. Miss Ibrahim noted the sad fact that volunteer readers for blind students at universities have almost disappeared, and called upon students to assist their blind classmates. Two additional panelists/specialists, not suffering from blindness, concentrated on treatment and education of the blind. Dr. Nadim Farah, an eye specialist, played a videotape describing the various form of blindness and the causes of blindness which may occur with age. Mrs. Waddad Lahhoud, Principal of the Lebanese School for the Blind and the Deaf in Baabda noted the importance of allowing blind children to explore their surrounding. She emphasized the importance of special education and encouraged a healthy atmosphere for children with sensory disabilities.

The third panel discussion of

Wednesday, April 29 concentrated on **mental disabilities**. Dr. Waldtraut (Vallie) Merhej, The owner of the Diagnostic Center for Special Children, of whom we presented a profile in the previous issue of Al-Raida, moderated the discussion. Dr. Merhej stressed the urgent need for special centers, recognition of the disabled segment of the population by the government who continues to exclude them from the constitution and from development projects. Dr. Mousa Sharafeddine, Director of the Center for the Friends of the Handicap which acts as a school for Mentally Handicapped children explained the medical aspects and symptoms of Mental retardation. Mrs. Hana Salem, a model mother who has a down Syndrome child, presented a touching and encouraging description of her experience. She stressed the importance of early prevention and the various techniques parents can use with parents. She noted the primary role of the family and the parents in giving their children a chance to grow as normally as possible emphasizing patience and repetition of physical and mental exercises. Mrs. Leila Dirani discussed early prevention and education for mentally disabled children. She reiterated Mrs. Salem insistence on the importance of time which mentally disabled children cannot afford to lose. Yet, Mrs Dirani warned against rushing and pressuring for extraordinary achievements. Mrs. Samar Shalak showed a videocassette of Rehabilitation centers in Lebanon, which illustrated the various skills being instructed and performed by mentally disabled individuals. The purpose of the videocassette was to emphasize training and job opportunity for special people allowing them to become independent and productive.

The fourth and last lecture, of Wednesday, May 27 concentrated on **Deafness**. Among the panelists was Dr. George Zeitoun, an ENT

specialist, who explained the biological mechanism of hearing as well as medications and situations which cause deafness. A psychiatrist, Mr. Antoine Romanous, explained the psychology of treatment of the deaf and the despair and condition of parents. As far as educating and working with deaf children, Miss Mona Shalala spoke of teaching methods; and speech therapist, Miss Salma Jabr, gave the audience insights about how to communicate with the deaf children such as teaching them words which sound different and do not have silent vowels, linking words with facial expressions and avoiding to try too hard to articulate which only confuse the deaf child. The Moderator was Mrs. Randa Khoury, Director of the Nursery School of International College, an instructor of psychology of the young child at Beirut University College and a previous staff member of IWSAW.

This series of panel discussions serves as a first attempt to create public awareness among university student, educational, medical and social specialists, and the general public. The primary suggestions and demands produced were: **the urgent need for the creation of specialized centers; getting special funding for further development and care of special people and their needs; and the establishment of education for special people curricula and training in the universities.** Consequently, Beirut University College is studying the establishment of a special education training program for pre-school teachers. A lot remains to be done and awareness is only the beginning, for early prevention, training and incorporating the disabled sector of the population in development and society.

Hopefully, this activity will prove to be a sound and effective beginning, and more public awareness lectures and activities will be organized in the future •

The speakers:

### (1) Physical Disability:

Dr. Najih Mufarj, Neurosurgeon; Mrs. Nahla Ghadour, Education and therapy of physically disabled children; Mr. Hasan Wa'riyeh, rehabilitation specialist; and Dr. Mousa Sharafeddine as moderator.

### (2) Blindness

Dr. Nadim Farah, Ophthalmologist, Mrs. Waddad Lahoud, Principal of the School of the Blind in Baabda; Miss Amal Ibrahim, teacher at the Huda School for the Blind and Deaf, spoke of her personal experience as a blind person; Mr. Mu'nis Abdel Wahhab, a Rehabilitation specialist at the al-Huda School for the Blind, also blind by birth; and Miss Laudie Jurdak, who also hold a degree in Mass Communication from BUC, acted as moderator.

### (3) Mental Disabilities

Dr. Mousa Sharafeddine, Director of the Center for the Friends of the Handicap; Mrs. Leila Dirani, education specialist; Mrs. Hana Salem, model mother; and Dr. Waldtraut (Vallie) Merhej, owner of the Diagnostic Center for Special Children, of whom we presented a profile in the previous issue of Al-Raida, acted as moderator.

### (4) Deafness

Dr. George Zaytoun, E.N.T. at the American University of Beirut Hospital; Mr. Antoine Romanous, Psychologist and professor at the St. Joseph University; Miss. Mona Shalala, personal experience; Miss Salma Jabr, speech Therapist; and Mrs. Randa Khoury, Instructor of Psychology at BUC and director of preschool at the International College, acted as moderator.