

Barriers to Education for People with Disabilities in Bekaa, Lebanon

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a recent study on the educational situation of people with disabilities in Lebanon. The main findings of a survey conducted with 200 participants in the impoverished rural Bekaa region illustrate the inadequate educational situation of people with disabilities. The focus of the paper is on a discussion of the barriers that people with disabilities face in pursuing their education. Participants identified the following difficulties in pursuing their education: educational system barriers, inadequate finances, health issues, transportation difficulties, and family pressures. Although the focus of the article is not on factors that can facilitate educational achievement, some of these supports are identified, including family support and personal motivation. The article concludes with a discussion of current and planned community responses such as the development of an interdisciplinary community action network (The Inclusion Network), the provision of literacy courses, and a pilot project to foster the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

Key Words: Lebanon, education, disability rights

Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of education for people with disabilities in Lebanon by describing the findings of a recent study and discussing efforts to deal with some of the problems that this population group is facing. The findings presented here are part of a larger study conducted by the author of this paper as part of the work of the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (LPHU), a grassroots non-governmental organization (NGO) founded by and for people with disabilities in 1981. The larger study examined the educational and employment situation of people with disabilities in the Bekaa region, one of Lebanon's most impoverished regions. As with many other "Third World" countries, social and economic development in Lebanon has favored urban areas at the expense of rural regions such as the Bekaa. Considering the important link between poverty, marginalization and inadequate educational opportunities (UNDP, 2003), the present study sought to explore the types of barriers that people with disabilities experienced in their attempts to pursue education in an impoverished area such as Bekaa. The study aimed to identify these barriers with the hope of better targeting community development and policy-making efforts.

In a discussion of global rights legislation, Manderson (2004) highlighted the marginalization experienced by people with disabilities in areas such as work and education. She noted that 80% of people with disabilities live in resource-poor societies where they are typically marginalized because they are deemed incapable of contributing to society. In an issue of this journal focusing on a critical exploration of special education, Conway (2005) emphasized that "people with disabilities have an on-going fight for the right to be educated and to have the full range of opportunities for employment and daily living that are available to the majority of the population" (p. 6). Speaking of the American context, Scotch and Schriener

(1997) maintained that it is marginalization and exclusion from schooling that has greatly contributed to disadvantages experienced by people with disabilities. In Lebanon, the situation is similar in that people with disabilities have historically been prevented from participation in mainstream society and notably in the mainstream educational system; this situation has also contributed to their marginalization. Several NGOs, including those founded by and for people with disabilities, have lobbied for societal changes including the passing of Law 220 that clearly stipulates for the right of people with disabilities to be included in mainstream society, including public or private schools.

However, despite the passing of this Law in 2000, not much has changed and children with disabilities are mostly inadequately educated within special care institutional settings (Lakkis & Thomas, 2003). Yet, governmental funding through the Ministry of Social Affairs is still directed towards these types of institutions despite an official law that seeks to promote inclusion in the mainstream educational system. Indeed, as Harlan and Robert (1998) noted in their discussion of the Americans with Disabilities Act, “There is a great difference between passing a law and the social process that leads to actualization of the intended reform” (p. 398). In Lebanon, community organizations such as LPHU have engaged in sustained advocacy efforts to push for the implementation of this Law. An important component of their efforts is research such as the study discussed in this article. Within a context of widespread marginalization and some would say “invisibility” (Mansour, 2001) of people with disabilities, there is a need to better understand their experiences as an important step in addressing the societal barriers that undermine the effectiveness of legislative changes and keep them from being able to fully participate in mainstream society.

Literature Review

While there is a dearth of studies on the educational situation of people with disabilities in Lebanon, studies across the world have identified the types of difficulties that this population in general may face. As Barnes (2005) notes, it is important to try to understand the problems that people with disabilities encounter, not as being due to personal deficits related to impairments, but as being rooted in broader disabling social environments. As such, several authors have identified social and cultural perceptions of disability as impacting on educational experience (Baker & Donnelly, 2001; Chimedza, 1998; Harry, 1992). These perceptions are crucial in influencing whether children with disabilities are seen as capable or even worthy of pursuing education.

Barriers Within the Educational System

Studies have highlighted a number of barriers for people with disabilities within the educational system, such as inadequate teacher training or preparation to work with children with disabilities (Forlin, Hattie and Douglas, 1996; Johnstone, 2005; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Wong, Pearson, Ip & Lo, 1999). A study conducted in Lesotho with 140 teachers found that disability was understood from a deficit approach and students with disabilities were automatically expected to be able to do less than others (Johnstone, 2005). A Hong Kong study on the educational experiences of children with disabilities in 224 schools found a lack of resources and inadequate training for educators (Wong et al., 1999). Another study conducted

with 273 educators confirmed the great stress they experience in working with children with disabilities (Forlin et al., 1996). These findings are echoed in a meta-analysis of 28 research reports which found that educators lack the necessary time and expertise to work with children with disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

The Impact of Socio-Cultural Perceptions

Among the studies focused on educational barriers are two studies that demonstrate the impact of socio-cultural perceptions of disability on educational and other experiences (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997; Phillips, 1990). A study by Phillips (1990) explored the narratives of 33 men and women with disabilities over an 18 month period. Findings indicated prevalent societal misconceptions that limit educational opportunities. For example, participants were often discouraged from pursuing higher education by school counselors even if they had excelled in school, because they were simply seen as “incapable” due to having a disability. A similar finding was echoed in a review of research studies conducted over a ten-year period on the educational and employment outcomes of youth with disabilities (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997). Findings indicated significantly higher school dropout rates for youth with disabilities, as well as much less access to higher education and employment.

The Role of Parents and Peers

Also discussed in the literature are the important roles that parents and peers play in educational success (Keller, 1999; Pal, Chaudhury, Sengupta & Das, 2002; Woodard, 1995). Based on a survey of 92 parents of elementary age school children with disabilities, the study identified family stress as an important factor impacting children’s educational experiences (Keller, 1999). Another study confirmed the important role of parents in the overall societal integration of their children with disabilities (Pal et al., 2002). Findings indicated that beyond impairments associated with the disability, the lives of children with disabilities, including school attendance, are also limited by parental perceptions of their children’s capacities. Another study by Woodard (1995) explored the attitudes of 33 children toward participating in a recreational activity with a peer having a disability. Findings indicated varying degrees of reluctance to engage in such activities, impacted upon by children’s perceptions of the disability type.

The Lebanese Context

In Lebanon, there has been a growing interest in examining the educational needs of children with disabilities, as part of a movement of parents and civil society actors seeking to promote inclusion. Most of the studies that have been conducted on this topic are available in unpublished or organizational reports, the findings of which are described below. It is important to preface this discussion by highlighting the absence of any reliable official statistics on matters related to people with disabilities. Indeed, while the Central Administration of Statistics estimates the percentage of people with disabilities to be 1.5% of the population, a UN survey estimates the number to be 10% of the general population. This discrepancy has been attributed to differing classification systems as well as the marginalization of people with disabilities (Mansour, 2001).

In 1999, a needs assessment of the Lebanese educational system in the field of special education was conducted by UNESCO experts (McBride, Dirani & Mukalid, 1999). The study estimated that there are approximately 310,118 children who could benefit from special education in Lebanon. The authors discussed the marginalization of children with disabilities and recommended the development of an educational delivery system that would promote inclusion of students in mainstream educational settings.

Another study presented at the Second National Conference on the Education of Persons with Special Needs in Lebanon found that most schools are not yet open or equipped to working with children with disabilities. For example, the study identified that there is a lack of openness to the idea of inclusion as well as lack of adequate qualifications of teaching staff (Brousse-Chamichian, Murphy, Makarem & Marji, 2000).

The official governmental policy has been to relegate the education of children with disabilities to the domain of the Ministry of Social Affairs (not the Ministry of Education). Hence, the focus has been on provision of care not education. As a result, people with disabilities have not had access to adequate educational opportunities. The findings of a study exploring educational and vocational attainment conducted by LPHU with 200 graduates of special care institutions indicated that almost half were not promoted from primary school (Lakkis & Thomas, 2003). This is an alarming statistic considering that the national promotion rate in 1999 was 87.7% (CRDP, 1999). Moreover, the authors report that the illiteracy rates for younger members of the sample were 23% for those aged 14-26, compared to 3.7% of the general population between the ages of 15-23.

A more recent study conducted by this author on behalf of a consortium of NGOs was part of a World Bank funded project promoting inclusion in social, vocational and educational domains (Wehbi, 2006). Through interviews, surveys and focus groups with parents, children, educators, NGOs, and policy-makers, the study aimed to identify available information, current policies and legislation, main stakeholders and existing programs on inclusion of people with disabilities. Findings indicated a lack of awareness of the rights and experiences of people with disabilities, in addition to a shortage of qualified educators.

In short, the above-mentioned studies from Lebanon and elsewhere point to a variety of possible barriers that can hinder or negatively impact the educational experience of people with disabilities. The role of the socio-cultural context, support for teachers and parents, qualifications of educational staff, parental perceptions, openness of educational institutions to inclusion, as well as peer interaction, can all be important in understanding what could hinder or facilitate the educational attainment of children with disabilities. Studies from Lebanon tend to describe the educational attainment of people with disabilities or to focus on the topic of inclusion. Moreover, these studies tend to be national in scope without particular attention accorded to specific regions. The study described in this article is the first of its kind to explore in-depth the actual barriers that may hinder the educational experience of people with disabilities in a specific region, the Bekaa.

Methodology

The exploratory study described in this article was conducted as one of the activities in a larger project that saw the establishment of an LPHU job center in Bekaa geared towards people with disabilities, in consideration of their marginalization in the mainstream job search and placement field, and in Lebanese society in general. The study aimed to provide the background information necessary to better target the center's interventions. In addition, the study aimed to contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the situation of people with disabilities in Lebanon, in the hope of developing better policies and practices. Study findings focusing on the employment situation are published in a separate article (Wehbi & El-Lahib, forthcoming).

This study relied on quantitative methods using a survey for data collection. While most of the data collected was quantitative in nature, some questions asked for qualitative information in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues confronting people with disabilities. The sample was composed of 200 participants selected from a list of people with disabilities registered under Law 220 for tax-break purposes with local municipalities in Bekaa. Selection was purposive and aimed to ensure a diversity of the sample in terms of geographic location within Bekaa, type of impairment, age and gender. Surveys were conducted by research assistants and the author of this article in a location chosen by the participant, usually the home or workplace.

Study Sample

The final sample included participants from 33 villages in the West and Central Bekaa regions, the two areas of Bekaa targeted by the job centre project—the remote area of North Bekaa is not part of the project. In addition, sample selection sought participants with a diversity of impairments, while being aware that an official survey estimated the incidence of mobility impairments to be the highest percentage (48.8%) of people with disabilities in Lebanon (Central Administration of Statistics, 1997). The percentages of people with other types of impairments according to official statistics are the following: 20% sensory (speech/hearing), 17.8% developmental, and 4.4% visual. In comparison, our final sample was composed of participants with the following impairments: 54% mobility, 18% sensory, 19% developmental, and 9% visual. In indicating the type of impairment on a participant's survey, the research assistants relied on the Ministry of Social Affairs' classification indicated on a participant's "disability identification card" issued to people with disabilities in Lebanon. It is important to note that an effort was made to speak to a participant with developmental disability directly. In a handful of cases, parents were present and answered questions on behalf of the participant.

In terms of age distribution, the sample focused on people of working age considering the connection of the study to the job centre project. However, a range of ages was sought to increase the diversity of the sample. In the final sample, participants ranged in age from 18 to 66, with the average age being 32 years. The sample included 74 participants between the ages of 18 and 26, 89 participants between 27 and 40, and 38 participants over 40.

Considering the particular marginalization and issues facing women with disabilities in Lebanese society (Abu-Habib, 1998), a special effort was made to ensure as equal a representation in the sample as possible. At the outset of sample selection, we were aware of the

difficulty in achieving this equal distribution, especially since the larger study sought as much as possible to identify a mixture of employed and unemployed participants. This difficulty reflects the reality of the underemployment and invisibility of women with disabilities in the mainstream labor market. The final sample included 86 women (43% of the sample).

Study Limitations

A word is in order about the limitations of the study. An important limitation concerns participant selection. It can be argued that by relying on official tax-break records to locate participants with disabilities, the sample was biased in terms of social class. Perhaps those who are not in financial need may not register with the municipality to receive a tax break. However, the reality in Lebanon is that most people with disabilities are among the poorest of the poor (Central Administration of Statistics, 1997). Nonetheless, future explorations could try to locate people with disabilities from affluent families to assess differences in experience from those in poorer families. Indeed, it would be interesting to better understand the link between poverty, marginalization and educational attainment.

Another important limitation concerns the focus of the study on barriers to educational achievement. While the study asked participants what may have facilitated their educational experience, only 24 participants answered this question, and in a less detailed way than those who indicated having experienced barriers. It would be useful for future explorations to place more emphasis on what facilitates the educational attainment of people with disabilities as this information could be useful in developing policy and practice responses that could reinforce existing supports.

Findings and Discussion

Education Level and Literacy

The main findings of the study illustrate the inadequate educational situation of people with disabilities. The majority (54%) of the study's participants had only reached an educational level below intermediate school, only 7% had attained a vocational certificate and only 6% had university degrees. These figures compare unfavorably to those of the general population aged 15-24 where approximately 25% have vocational training and 25% of those aged 20-24 are enrolled in university (Al-Yassir et al., 1998)—this official UNDP report does not provide promotion rates or details about the type or level of vocational training. In terms of rates of illiteracy, findings indicate a rate of 50%, where 26% of participants indicated that they were illiterate, another 24% indicated that while they had some schooling and were counted in the figure of 54% above, they could not read nor write, or could barely do so.

While we do not claim the study's sample to be representative of the population of people with disabilities, the findings in terms of educational attainment are quite telling. Clearly, the majority of the study's sample had below intermediate education. This finding confirms previous demographic studies such as the one by the Lebanese Central Administration of Statistics (1997) that found over 50% of people with disabilities to be illiterate.

In addition to their attainment through formal education, 50 participants (25% of the sample) had also received some form of vocational training with some participants receiving more than one type of training. It is noteworthy that for most, the training remained at the beginner level. In general, 47% of those who had received vocational training had beginner-level computer or typing training. Another 21% had some form of arts or crafts training, and 11% had training in sewing. The remaining participants had training in nursing, first aid, photography, hairdressing and accounting.

When asked if they felt they needed more training to be able to have better job opportunities, many indicated that they needed computer and foreign language skills. In addition, a few participants indicated that they needed to take literacy courses, considering that they were illiterate or had forgotten the little they had been taught at school.

As noted earlier, the likelihood that a person with a disability will not complete her or his education is higher than for the general population. In this study, we attempted to find out what some of the difficulties on the educational path might be. In fact, 162 out of 186 participants who answered the question asking them whether they had experienced barriers to continuing their education indicated experiencing one or more obstacle. In general, the most cited difficulties were the following: educational system barriers (59%), inadequate finances (47%), health issues (28%), family pressure (23%), and transportation difficulties (13%).

Barriers in the Educational System

The most important obstacle faced by the study's participants appears to be located within the educational system itself. More specifically, many participants were unable to continue their education either because the school could not adjust to their disabilities or because they had studied in specialized institutions or public schools and still came out illiterate.

In the first case, many participants were either unable to attend school or had reached a stage where the school was no longer able to accommodate them. Many villages do not have schools, let alone accessible ones and their academic programs are not geared to a diverse student body. For example, one participant who is Deaf gradually lost his hearing and was forced to leave school when he could no longer hear the teacher. As noted in the review of previous studies cited in this paper, schools appear to be lacking in qualified personnel or in the ability to make the necessary accommodations for students with disabilities. These students with disabilities are thus deprived of the possibility of continuing their education in the mainstream educational system. The necessity of funding schools in rural regions is evermore highlighted in the case of children with disabilities, as part of a solution that would address some of the barriers that they face.

Moreover, when enrolled in mainstream schools, participants indicated that they still left the school as practically illiterate. This could be due to the non-adaptation of school curricula to the additional needs of students with disabilities. As an example, one participant with cerebral palsy and speech difficulties went to school until the third elementary but still came out illiterate. She describes how she was cast aside in the classroom and was only sent to school so that she would not be a "burden" in the household. Another participant describes how she felt that her

classmates and teachers did not accept her because of her disability. As noted in the literature review, there seems to be a lack of awareness on the part of peers and educators of the needs of students with disabilities, which is compounded by a lack of awareness by parents themselves.

In many other cases, students with disabilities are forced to stop their education because the schools in their village only reach a certain academic level and they are unable to secure the necessary transportation to go to another village or to the city to continue their education. This is especially the case for women who are often prevented by their families from leaving the village. More about this difficulty and transportation issues will be discussed below.

A related obstacle is that of the physical inaccessibility of educational institutions. For some study participants, ambitions of continuing their education either at the school level or at the level of university were curbed due to the physical inaccessibility of the educational institution. Because the few accessible schools or universities were outside the village or the region, many were unable or unwilling to leave their villages to pursue their education. It is important to note that leaving home before marriage is not the norm in Lebanese society, and this is especially the case for women. This prohibition of leaving home is further exacerbated for people with disabilities and especially women, who are seen as incapable of taking care of themselves. This aspect of the socio-cultural context is important to keep in mind when attempting to address educational barriers; specifically, any policy or community development solutions that attempt to address this barrier by simply increasing funding without taking into account local conceptions would be amiss.

As for others who had studied in specialized institutions, they left school as either illiterate or could barely read and write. Indeed, some participants indicated that they did not continue their education because when the mainstream school could no longer adapt to their needs, they refused to go into a specialized school. In some cases, parents refused to send their children away from the village to an institution. For many participants, the experience of being in a specialized school was one of being inadequately provided for in terms of education. For others, the experience was one of abuse. The parent of one participant with multiple disabilities pulled her daughter out of a reputed special care institution when she discovered that her daughter was being given pills to block her bowel movements so that the attendant did not have to worry about taking her to the bathroom. Whether through inadequate education or through abuse, there is a reinforcement of the idea that people with disabilities are not fit for, nor worthy of participation in society.

Other barriers in the educational system appear to be at the level of policy. More specifically, one participant who was studying in a vocational school and later developed muscular dystrophy tried switching into a less physically taxing academic program. He was unable to do so because current educational policies do not permit switching from the vocational to the academic track. Another participant faced a different sort of policy-related barrier. This young woman studied in a special care institution until she became engaged at the age of 17. At that point, she was told that she could no longer be enrolled in the school. Realizing the importance of having an education, she tried negotiating her stay in the school but the administration refused citing institutional policies. This case can be seen as an example of the impact of the socio-cultural context on the educational experiences of people with disabilities.

More specifically, it can be argued that this policy is informed by a limited perception of women's primary roles in Lebanese society. Seen to have fulfilled her primary role of becoming a wife (or being on the road to it), this participant was no longer deemed to be in need of an education. Moreover, with a husband to support her, she is no longer seen to be in need of the support of a special care institution. Interestingly, she was divorced after a year of marriage and found herself without the vocational or academic skills needed in the marketplace to support herself.

Inadequate Finances

The second most important obstacle faced by the study's participants is related to finances. As previously mentioned, the Bekaa region is characterized by high rates of poverty. While public school has minimal associated tuition fees, these can be beyond the reach of many families. Not surprisingly, many participants indicated that poor finances prevented their families from sending them to school or prevented them from continuing on to higher education.

For some families, finances deteriorated when their child developed a disability. Family income was increasingly spent on treatment or medications and less on education. While health policy in Lebanon makes provision for medical insurance for people with disabilities registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs, this is rarely honored by medical institutions. As a result, people with disabilities who can afford to pay for treatments do so at their own expense.

For many, the absence from their region of schools adapted to their additional needs meant that they would have had to enroll in specialized institutions or in private schools. Without the financial means to do so, their learning opportunities were quite restricted. The gap between those who can afford to send their children to school and those who cannot is put in relief. The impact of inadequate finances on the educational experience of people with disabilities highlights the direct link between poverty and marginalization. Without a proper education, people with disabilities are further marginalized in a society that already discriminates against them due to long-held misconceptions of their inadequacy.

Health Reasons Related to the Disability

Another important barrier to education is related to the impact on health engendered by a disability. Several participants indicated that they had spent lengthy amounts of time in surgeries and in treatment which prevented them from pursuing their education. Considering that the mainstream educational system is not adapted to allow in its programming for the additional needs of students with disabilities, any absence on their part threatens their ability to pursue their education. This problem is further compounded when the inadequacy of finances of many families is taken into account. Moreover, if a school already lacks the openness to accept students with disabilities, any absence on their part may be construed as a sufficient excuse for their dismissal.

Ironically, students with disabilities who face obstacles related to the educational system's inability to respond to their differing needs are made responsible for the shortcomings of the system. It is seen as their responsibility to persevere in their studies, but they are not

provided with the necessary supports. This situation provides a clear example of “blaming the victim” that is often the lot of members of marginalized groups facing systemic oppression. Furthermore, it is important not to reduce this barrier to a criticism of a specific educational institution. The barriers people with disabilities face are tied to a systemic problem of the inadaptability of the educational system to their differing abilities and health situations.

Family Pressure

An important finding concerns the role that parents play in the educational experience of their children. At a primary level, the few parents who participated in the survey spoke about their children, specifically those with developmental disabilities, as being incapable of learning and of working. As reported in the literature review section, parents' beliefs and attitudes appear to be an important obstacle that can greatly limit their children's learning potential. Perhaps this is not surprising considering that parents, like others, are subject to societal misconceptions about people with disabilities.

Other parents prevented their children from pursuing an education out of (often justified) fear. Some parents indicated that they would not allow their children to leave their sight or to leave the village out of fear for their safety. In terms of the situation of girls with disabilities, parents seem to be caught in a double bind. On the one hand, parents have a right to fear for the safety of their daughters, especially considering that as in many other societies, girls and women are subjected to harassment and violence in Lebanon. A previous study by the author of this article on sexual violence in Lebanon highlighted the vulnerability of women with disabilities who are seen as “unmarriageable” and thus the “legitimate” targets of sexual violence (Wehbi, 2002). On the other hand, extreme fear for their safety can greatly limit their educational possibilities and future potential. By preventing girls from pursuing an education, parents inadvertently further contribute to the marginalization of their children.

Other types of family pressures that can become difficulties include a sickness or death in the family, and once again, girls are most likely to suffer the consequences. Some participants indicated that they left school when a family member died or became ill. As girls, they were seen by other family members as having the responsibility to care for the ill family member and to take care of the housekeeping.

A word of caution is necessary in this discussion: If we blame parents for their protectiveness or for the misconceptions they may hold, we fail to see the full picture and we devise responses that will undoubtedly be limited. For example, while awareness-raising among parents of children with disabilities is an important aspect of redressing misconceptions, it is not enough. As with individual educational institutions, targeting individual parents misses the point: The barrier facing people with disabilities is systemic in nature and transcends an individual family. Social structures such as the labor market that thrives on the unpaid or underpaid work of women, laws and social strictures that continue to condone directly or indirectly the sexual exploitation of women, as well as society's disregard for people with developmental disabilities, are all examples of what needs to be addressed to end the marginalization of people with disabilities.

Transportation Difficulties

A final important obstacle to educational attainment is lack of transportation. In the best of cases, transportation between and within villages in the Bekaa is quite challenging. There are limited means of public transport and those that do exist do not cover all possible routes. As previously mentioned, social and economic development in Lebanon has tended to favor urban areas. Rural regions such as Bekaa still lack an organized and reliable transportation infrastructure accessible to the population of the region as a whole.

The situation is even worse for people with disabilities, as no adapted means of public transportation exist. These transportation difficulties mean that people with disabilities wishing to continue their education have to possess means of transportation to be able to go to schools that are willing to accept them. Obviously, in a region where poverty rates are quite high, this option is not within the reach of many.

As for women, transportation difficulties are exacerbated as they are often limited by their families from using public means of transportation. Parents who participated in the survey often indicated that they would not send their daughters with just whomever to school because they fear for their safety from harassment or exploitation. As mentioned earlier, parents' fears are likely justified but do restrict girls' chances of pursuing an education.

In short, most participants indicated that they had faced difficulties in continuing their education, while a very small number (24) indicated having faced none. Among these participants are youths who are still studying and participants who had gained university degrees. Also included are those who had completed their studies prior to developing a disability and those who had made a personal decision to leave school. A relatively small number indicated that they were helped to continue their education through the support of their family members or through their own motivation. A small number as well indicated that their facility of movement permitted them to continue school despite their movement-related impairments.

Taking these difficulties and supports into consideration, community efforts have aimed to redress this problematic situation through a variety of responses. Considering the multi-faceted nature of the problems faced by people with disabilities in pursuing their education, these responses have been interdisciplinary and are described below.

Concluding Thoughts: Current and Future Responses

As seen from the studies discussed earlier in this paper, there are similar problems experienced by people with disabilities in Lebanon as those experienced in other countries. More specifically, institutional barriers such as those at the level of the educational system, socio-cultural misconceptions and factors, as well as family-related issues are key obstacles that are played out in their own specificity according to the Lebanese context. Other obstacles that relate to transportation or finances appear to be quite specific to the Bekaa region, a rural area with an underdeveloped transportation infrastructure and high rates of unemployment and poverty.

Moreover, it is important to highlight the impact of sexism on the experiences of women with disabilities attempting to pursue an education. More specifically, they are subject to family pressure and role expectations with regards to household and caring tasks that hinder their educational achievement. They are also subject to restrictions on their movement due to fear for their safety or to socio-cultural expectations of propriety that prevent them from freely pursuing an education on an equal footing as men.

Taking all these obstacles into account, several responses have been developed by civil society actors. Described below are community responses developed by NGOs composed of people with disabilities and NGOs working with people with disabilities. Because these actors understand that the marginalization of people with disabilities is not due to individual circumstances but to larger societal and institutional obstacles, responses have sought to change existing social conditions that prevent people with disabilities from successfully pursuing an education.

Beyond working on individual-level rehabilitation efforts, community responses to many of the obstacles identified in the Bekaa study have included the following: the development of an interdisciplinary community action and advocacy network (The Inclusion Network), the provision of literacy courses, and a pilot project to foster the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools through the combined efforts of social workers, special educators, occupational therapists, vocational therapists, and early intervention specialists. It is important to note that knowledge about these community-based responses has been gained by the author of this article through involvement in the work of disability rights NGOs in Lebanon. These responses have not been documented elsewhere (with the exception of some local organizational reports) and are therefore important to present here to a broader audience of academics, policy-makers and practitioners.

The Inclusion Network

The Inclusion Network came to life as a result of the efforts of parents, people with disabilities, professionals, educators as well as national and international NGO's. Members of the Network are concerned about the exclusion of people with disabilities from participating in mainstream Lebanese society in many key areas including education and employment.

The Inclusion Network has been active in addressing institutional and socio-cultural obstacles. More specifically, the Network has been instrumental in lobbying for legislative and policy changes within the educational system, in conducting awareness-raising campaigns to challenge societal misconceptions surrounding people with disabilities, and in conducting research to better understand the situation of inclusion in education in Lebanon.

Literacy Courses

Another important community response is the implementation of literacy courses offered to people with disabilities as part of the afore-mentioned job center project in the Bekaa region. LPHU, the NGO that developed and implemented this project sought to address some of the impacts of educational system barriers on the educational attainment of people with disabilities.

More specifically, realizing the marginalization that people with disabilities face and the high rates of illiteracy especially in rural regions, the center offered literacy courses initially open to adults with disabilities in the region. In addition to the literacy courses, participants are also able to benefit from follow-up by the center's social workers should they choose to pursue further educational or employment opportunities.

The courses were so popular that both daytime and afternoon sessions filled up very quickly. It is important to note that this result was also helped by the fact that transportation was arranged for and funded in collaboration with local municipalities. Also important to note is that the classes attracted people without disabilities who found out about the courses from their neighbors who have disabilities. Considering that the goal of the program is to promote inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream society, up to 15% of spaces in both classes were open to people without disabilities. It is ironic within the Lebanese context that a program for people with disabilities was able to provide learning opportunities to people without disabilities.

A final community response worth mentioning is the national pilot project funded by the World Bank and run by a consortium of an international NGO (Save the Children Sweden) and three local disability-rights NGOs (LPHU, Youth Association of the Blind and the Lebanese Down Syndrome Association). This 18-month project which is in its mid-point at the time of writing this article is implemented by a staff of social workers, special educators, occupational therapists and other educational and vocational professionals. The project assumes a logical connection between three distinct but interconnected domains: the social, the educational and the vocational. Work on the social domain sees the establishment and training of community advocacy committees composed of parents and people with disabilities to work on awareness-raising and lobby for changes related to educational and vocational inclusion. The educational domain is composed of efforts to include children with disabilities in ten schools across Lebanon while providing them and their families with the supports of special educators and social workers. This component also sees the development and implementation of teacher trainings and peer supports within the schools. Finally, the vocational domain would provide the supports necessary to people with disabilities to enable them to become participating members of the mainstream labor market.

The multi-faceted efforts of professionals working together with NGOs of people with disabilities hold a promise for change in existing social conditions that keep people with disabilities marginalized. It is too early in the history of inclusion in Lebanon to see all of these efforts bearing fruit on a large scale. However, what is certain is the need to continue to work towards full inclusion of people with disabilities not only in the educational sector but in all areas of life.

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