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**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION  
FOR WESTERN ASIA**  
ESCWA REGIONAL SEMINAR ON  
THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN INTEGRATING  
DISABLED WOMEN INTO SOCIETY  
16-18 October 1994  
Amman

UN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION  
FOR WESTERN ASIA  
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**ANNOTATED PROVISIONAL AGENDA**

1. Opening of the Seminar.

The Seminar will be opened at 10 a.m. on 16 October 1994 at the Royal Cultural Centre in Amman.

2. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work.

The Seminar will include the following major activities:

Substantive discussions on:

- (a) The extent and nature of the problems of disabled women and children in the ESCWA region, with particular emphasis on their socio-economic characteristics and the level of their social integration (or social marginalization);

(b) Childhood disability and the role of the family (particularly mothers) in terms of prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation;

(c) The role of grass-roots non-governmental organizations (NGOs [particularly women's NGOs]) in community-based rehabilitation (CBR);

(d) Terms of reference of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Disability in the ESCWA Region;

(e) Working group discussions to develop the guidelines for promoting social integration of disabled women in the ESCWA region.

Side-events to demonstrate disabled women's capabilities and creativity including:

(a) Exhibit of artistic work by disabled women, showing their capabilities;

(b) Charity bazaar organized by Jordanian NGOs of disabled persons and families of disabled women and girls;

(c) A concert by blind girl musicians.

3. The extent and nature of the problems of disabled women and children in the ESCWA region, with particular emphasis on their socio-economic characteristics and the level of their social integration (or social marginalization).

Disability affects women differently not only when they are themselves disabled but also as primary caretakers of disabled family members, namely as mothers or wives of disabled individuals. Disabled women and girls in the ESCWA member countries generally have a double handicap: one relating to sex and the second resulting from physical or mental disabilities.

Although State-sponsored education, accompanied by industrialization and urbanization, played a major role in creating a generation of more assertive and independent Arab women and in the increase in women's participation in development, the benefits of development have accrued mainly to middle class and upper middle class women. In 1990, adult literacy rates of women as a percentage of men's literacy rates ranged from 45 per cent (Yemen) to 87 per cent (Kuwait) in the ESCWA region, with many countries between 50 and 80 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Secondary school enrolment ratios of girls as a percentage of boys ratios during the period 1986-1989 were lower than 100 for all reporting countries except the United Arab Emirates, where girls enrolment was slightly higher: in Yemen it was only 17 per cent and in Iraq, 62 per cent.<sup>2</sup> This indicates significantly lower enrolment of girls in secondary school in all countries of the region except the United Arab Emirates.

Disabled women are the last to benefit from the development process. Available regional statistics show that the level of disabled Arab women's socio-economic development is much lower compared with able-bodied women and men, and even disabled men.

Education, for instance, is the key to most human development initiatives. Available statistics show that girls in the ESCWA region are less likely to attend school. Girls with disabilities are even

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World's Children 1994*.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1993*.

more restricted than able-bodied girls and disabled boys because they may not have access to the ordinary school system; in addition, they face the social stigma attached to "disabled women". Illiteracy rates are high among disabled women. For instance, in the Syrian Arab Republic, according to the 1981 Population Census, 80.50 per cent of "disabled women" were illiterate compared with 54.53 per cent for "the total female population" and 60.51 per cent for "the disabled male population". The percentage of disabled women who have completed higher education is almost marginal in many countries of the region. In the Syrian Arab Republic, in 1981, it was merely 0.23 per cent compared with 0.68 per cent for disabled men and 0.59 per cent for the total female population. Illiteracy and "impairment/disability" make up a vicious cycle: illiterate women do not know how to improve their own economic and social status, which in turn generates a dependency mentality and perpetuates their social "handicap".

In terms of employment, which is a prerequisite for living a life of dignity, disabled women are also faced with a double handicap. Participation of disabled women in the labour force is very limited in the ESCWA region. For instance, in Kuwait, according to the 1980 Census, the "active" Kuwaiti female disabled population (over 15 years old) was only 2.03 per cent of the total Kuwaiti female disabled population, compared with 9.62 per cent for the total Kuwaiti female population, 19.96 per cent for the Kuwaiti disabled male population and 66.84 per cent for the total Kuwaiti male population.

Disabled Arab women face more discrimination and difficulty in marriage than disabled men. Available statistics show that the rates of single, divorced and widowed disabled women are extremely high in many countries of the region. In the East Bank of Jordan, the ratio of married disabled women was only 44 per cent of that of disabled men.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, socio-economic characteristics of disabled women and their social integration (or social marginalization) in selected countries of the ESCWA region will be assessed based on the available statistical data and literature.

The countries of the region have made significant progress in channelling human and physical resources to prevent disability. The "classic" causes for impairment (such as paralysis caused by polio) have been declining in relative terms owing to nearly universal child immunization, improved education and better access to health care in some countries of the region. However, there are several hereditary, environmental and developmental factors that have caused impairments and that are particularly relevant to women, such as: very high fertility without proper birth spacing; the practice of kinship marriage; and lack of prenatal care for pregnant women. Such women-related causes of disability will be discussed.

It is necessary to analyse first the situation of Arab women and men in general, and disabled women, and then to develop a set of guidelines for promoting the integration of Arab disabled women in development.

#### Documentation

- A background paper on social integration of disabled women in the ESCWA region (to be prepared by the ESCWA secretariat), in addition to paper(s) on the subject prepared by experts.
- Implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons in the ESCWA Region at the end of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (E/ESCWA/SD/1992/13).

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan, Department of Statistics, *Statistics on the Disabled in Jordan*, 1983.

- Draft Long-Term Strategy to Further the Implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons towards the Year 2000 and Beyond: Towards a Society for All from Awareness to Action (E/ESCWA/SD/1992/WG.1/18).
- Final Report of the Cultural Event for Disabled Persons in the ESCWA Region: An Event to Mark the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992) in the ESCWA Region, 17-18 October 1992, Amman (E/ESCWA/SD/1992/WG.1/19).
- World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons.
- Social Statistics and Indicators in the ESCWA Region (E/ESCWA/SD/89/8)

4. Childhood disability and the role of the family (particularly mothers) in terms of prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation.

Poverty causes malnutrition which is extremely relevant to childhood disability. Vitamin A deficiency and Iodine deficiency are recognized as a major cause of child blindness and a cause of mental retardation. Low and underweight birth weights cause various kinds of childhood disabilities and are a major cause of maternal mortality and birth traumas. The available statistics indicate that 30 per cent of children (0-4 years) in Yemen are suffering from either severe or moderate underweight; 23 per cent in Oman, 12 per cent in Iraq, 10 per cent in Egypt and 6 per cent in Kuwait, where gross national product (GNP) per capita is over US\$ 16,150.<sup>4</sup> The infant mortality rates in Yemen and Saudi Arabia are still higher than the world average. Many studies have confirmed the positive correlation between the degree of women's illiteracy and child mortality and morbidity. According to the 1991 Qatar Child Health Survey, illiterate women tend to have a much higher chance of having a child with impairment/disability. The number of children with a disability per 1,000 children ever-born to illiterate women is 8.4 compared with only 6.9 for those born to literate women. There is an urgent need to introduce measures to eliminate birth-related accidents leading to childhood disability by supporting safe motherhood in the ESCWA region.

The Arab family is the major informal institution which is primarily responsible for the socialization, training and education of children. It is also a source of cohesion and support for its family members. Women also play a very important role as caretakers of disabled family members, particularly in community-based rehabilitation settings. This is especially critical given the fact that the majority of disabled children have no access to institutional rehabilitation services in rural communities of the ESCWA region. These services are crucial in terms of prevention and early intervention. Disability inflicts a cost—psychological, social and economic—upon the disabled person and his/her family. How can mothers prevent or intervene to ameliorate childhood disabilities? Proper genetic counselling before marriage was proposed by many regional experts in order to reduce the high incidence of various hereditary impairments. Putting the newborn child on a special diet for a certain period might help to eliminate some childhood disabilities. Women should refrain from getting pregnant at an extremely young or old age. Issues of proper birth spacing and the practice of breast-feeding are raised by regional experts as well. According to the above-mentioned report on Qatar, the number of children with an impairment as a proportion of all children ever-born increases in accordance with the mother's age. Immunization of pregnant mothers and early detection of and proper intervention in childhood "impairments" are prerequisites for reducing permanent children's "handicaps". Underlying all these measures is the basic approach of raising the status of Arab women,

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, op. cit.

including the eradication of illiteracy and the provision of equal opportunities in education, training and employment.

The role of the family should be addressed within the framework of "cooperation" and sharing of "responsibilities" among different members of the family. Although the family is the major informal institution that is primarily responsible for the socialization of Arab children, rapid social changes have led to a gradual erosion of the traditional social values of Arab society. Socio-economic factors, including the growing participation of women in the labour force and the emergence of the nuclear family as well as changing attitudes and values should be carefully analysed in this regard.

Under this agenda, the issues related to the role of women and the role of the family in terms of prevention of, early intervention in and rehabilitation of childhood disabilities will be discussed within the framework of the overall development of Arab women.

#### Documentation

- Impact of social and economic changes on the Arab family: an exploratory study (E/ESCWA/SD/1992/4).
  - Childhood disability and the role of the family (particularly mothers) in terms of prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation.
5. The role of grass-roots NGOs (particularly women's NGOs) in community-based rehabilitation (CBR).

NGOs play an important role in prevention, rehabilitation and the equalization of opportunities for disabled persons, particularly in CBR settings, and can make great contributions to the advancement of these people. In the ESCWA region, Arab women are the most important resources in the community to organize the grass-roots NGOs, and that provide social services to the needy. The World Programme of Action states that, all over the world, disabled persons have started to unite in non-governmental organizations which advocate their rights by influencing policies and decision-making in Governments and in all sectors of society. The role of these organizations is to provide a voice for disabled persons; to identify their needs; to give them a forum for expressing their views on priorities; to evaluate services; and to promote change and public awareness.

Services provided to disabled persons through centralized institutional activities do not always reach sufficient numbers of disabled persons (particularly disabled women), especially those in rural and remote areas. CBR should be promoted as advocated within the framework of the International Year of the Family. Local community initiatives should be promoted. Disabled persons and their families should be encouraged to form grass-roots organizations. Also needed is governmental recognition of the importance of these organizations as well as governmental support in the form of financial aid and training. A prerequisite for the development of CBR for disabled women could be the systematic assessment of existing community-development projects that can satisfy their needs, with the aim of selecting the most appropriate CBR approach for the particular social and cultural conditions of each community in the ESCWA region.

As a part of its efforts to assist Member States in the strengthening of disabled persons, the United Nations undertook a major project in 1990 that identified the support and advice needed by newly established organizations. As a result, a set of practical guidelines for developing and strengthening organizations of disabled persons was published. However, these measures must be applied and adapted to suit the particular cultural and social needs of the ESCWA region. Under this

agenda item, experts will be requested to examine how disabled women can be given opportunities to perform effectively in the social-economic and cultural life of their societies and how to develop fully their potential within the organizational framework of NGOs. The evaluation will be based on the guidelines and papers presented by regional experts. As the efficient functioning of NGOs in CBR requires training in organizational and management skills, special attention will be paid to the role of the family and to training programmes for the family.

#### Documentation

- Guidelines for the development of organizations of disabled persons (E/ESCWA/SD/1992/WG.1/9).
- Promotion of non-governmental organizations and their effective coordination in the ESCWA region (by A. Al-Khatib [in Arabic]) (E/ESCWA/SD/1992/WG.1/16).
- The role of grass-roots non-governmental organizations (NGOs [particularly women's NGOs]) in community-based rehabilitation (CBR).

#### 6. Terms of reference of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Disability in the ESCWA Region.

The United Nations Task Force on Disabled Children and Women has been established and its activities are being coordinated and partially financed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which would also serve as its focal point. The first regional meeting of the Task Force (African region) was held on the UNICEF premises in Nairobi with the assistance of the UNICEF regional office there.

This session of the ESCWA Regional Task Force, to be held in Amman, will be organized within the framework of a series of regional meetings of the Task Force for the ESCWA region. It will be the first joint project on disability issues between ESCWA and UNICEF and will strengthen, at the regional level, the existing ESCWA inter-agency coordination mechanism which was established in 1989. All United Nations agencies actively involved in the field will be invited to formulate the terms of reference of the Task Force.

#### 7. Working group discussions to develop the guidelines for promoting social integration of disabled women in the ESCWA region.

On the basis of the plenary discussions, small working groups will develop regional guidelines on the role of family in promoting social integration of disabled women in the ESCWA region.

#### 8. Finalization of the drafting of the regional guidelines.

#### 9. Adoption of the regional guidelines.

The Seminar will adopt the regional guidelines.



