

At MDAA we do **advocacy**. This means we work together with people with disability, families, and the community to promote, protect and secure the rights and interests of people from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability and their families and carers in NSW.

*How we can help you and your family*

**Individual Advocacy:** A worker, called an advocate, works with you when your rights are ignored. The advocate will 'stand beside' you and support you, so you can make your own decisions and get what you need. An advocate can help you stand up for your rights, for example, when you have problems with housing, immigration, work, school, and disability services.

*How we can help your community*

**Advocacy Development:** We work together with groups of people with disability and their families to learn more about standing up for your rights and needs. This can help you to have a say about the things that are important to you.

**Community Development:** MDAA can work with your community to increase knowledge and awareness about disability, disability services and the rights of people with disability.

**Systemic Advocacy:** We lobby politicians and government departments to make things better for people from a NESB with disability and their families.

**Our advocacy and community development services are free.**



***opening doors***  
***Disability experienced***  
***in Arab countries and***  
***Australia***



**Working for a NSW where the diversity of disability and culture is anticipated, supported and celebrated**

*Acknowledged by*



AL ZAHRA MUSLIM WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION INC.

Maeve Dunnett and Sandra Schlossar wrote this report for the

Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW

PO Box 381

Harris Park NSW 2150

Australia

Phone: +61 (0)2 9891 6400

Fax: +61 (0)2 9635 5355

E-mail: [mdaa@mdaa.org.au](mailto:mdaa@mdaa.org.au)

Website: [www.mdaa.org.au](http://www.mdaa.org.au)

© Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW

First published June 2004

ISBN 1-920821-07-4

This report is copyright. Non-profit community groups have permission to reproduce any part of the report, so long as the original meaning is maintained and proper credit is given to the author and the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW. All other persons and organisations wanting to reproduce material from this report should obtain permission from the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW.

MDAA gratefully acknowledges the support of the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

## Acknowledgments

'opening doors' was undertaken by MDAA together with many individuals and organisations to increase the knowledge about disability in different ethnic communities.

MDAA would like to thank everyone from the community who helped us with this project.

## Contents

How we treated people with disability in the past	6
What are the myths or beliefs about disability in Arab countries?	7
Were there any events that changed attitudes to people with disability?	8
Has the language we use to talk about people with disability changed?	9
Are there any differences in the way city and country people respond to disability?	9
What services are there for people with disability?	9
What role do families play in caring for people with disability?	10
What do people in Arab countries know about the rights of people with disability? How has this changed over the years?	10
Web Sites used in writing this document	12
What is Disability?	14
What support can people with disability get?	15
How to find out more about services for people with disability	16

## **Disability experienced in Arab countries**

This introduction focuses on experiences of disability of people and families from Arab countries. Some of these attitudes and beliefs are common to other cultures.

### **How we treated people with disability in the past**

There is great variety within and between our different Arab countries. Family structures and relationships are extremely strong for Arabic speaking people. In general, the traditional response to people with disability across all religions and cultures in Arab countries is based on care and support being provided by the family.

While people with disability have often been treated well within the family, this has not always been true in the wider community. There have been many different views about disability within and across different Arab countries. Different cultures have different ways of thinking about disability. For some when a child with disability was born the family would experience grief and distress. People with disability would often grow up not being seen as 'whole'. Some parents would also have kept their child away from the community to protect them from the teasing and abuse they might experience from others.

In some Arab countries disability could also cause disturbance and conflict in a family, with parents blaming each other for causing the disability. Other family members would often have difficulty finding marriage partners. Having a disability or having a family member with a disability often resulted in being isolated from other members of the community.

Generally disability was not seen in a positive way in many Arab countries and we tended to look upon disability with pity and shame. People often look for reasons why there is disability in their

family and some people feel that god must be punishing them for the past wrongs of family members. For some people mental illness and intellectual disability caused greater concern than deafness or blindness or having a physical disability. On the other hand in



some communities disability was seen as a test from god and people with disability were regarded as having special gifts. Christianity and Islam were important in shaping some of the beliefs about disability and about how we provided support to people with disability in the various Arabic countries.

Generally speaking in most Arab countries there were no special services for people with disability.

### **What are the myths or beliefs about disability in Arab countries?**

For many Arabic speaking people the word 'disability' carries with it a feeling of pity, particularly for people with intellectual disability or mental illness.

Our various cultures have different stories and assumptions about disability, with many people having a strong belief that disability is fate and the will of God. This leads to disability often being often seen as a test for people with disability and their caring as a privilege.

In many Arab countries some people believed that some types of disability, especially mental illness, was a sign of being possessed by the devil. This is less common now than in the past.

In some countries particular jobs are often done by people with a certain disability, for example, many blind people become musicians, poets and respected religious leaders.

### **Were there any events that changed attitudes to people with disability?**

Change happens all the time and in our countries and communities there have been many changes to the ways we used to live and the way we see people with disability.

In Egypt, for example, the wars of 1967 and 1973 led the community to think differently about soldiers who experienced physical disability and mental illness. The government felt responsible to provide pensions for those affected. This led to broader services being established for people who had not acquired their disability in war.

In some countries many in the community might see a disability acquired by resisting the regime (i.e. through torture) as an honour.

Generally, across Arab countries, having a disability from war is viewed more positively by the community, compared with being born with disability. This together with the increased numbers of people with disability through war has raised the profile of people with disability who are now seen more often in the community.



Many Arab countries also have people with disability involved in a disability rights movement, seeing themselves as part of the global disability rights movement. For example, in Lebanon in 1987 during the civil war, people with disability started a peace march from the north to the south. These actions greatly empowered the disability rights movement in Lebanon. This and other actions led to the establishment of the Arab Organization of Disabled People.

Since the first United Arab Emirates Rehabilitation Conference and Exhibition in 1996 the Royal Family of the United Arab Emirates has made many changes to how disability is experienced in that country. There has been an expansion of services and awareness.

## Has the language we use to talk about people with disability changed?

In the past in many Arab cultures, people were often known by their disability or their connection to people with disability such as 'the daughter of the woman with no hands'. People with disability were often not seen as whole human beings.

We are now beginning to talk about disability in a more positive way, especially for people with physical disability. Like in most parts of the world, progress is slower for people with mental illness or intellectual disability, who are often still described as 'retarded'; 'crazy'; 'lunatics'.

## Are there any differences in the way city and country people respond to disability?

In most Arab countries cities have better services and access to services for people with disability and their families. In country areas compassion for people with disability is more likely to be common because people in small communities usually have stronger ties.

## What services are there for people with disability?

In most countries there is no well developed social service system, and for people with disability with no income or family to rely on life is very difficult. Poverty is also a big problem, especially in countries that have recently experienced war.

In some countries there are special schools and rehabilitation services, which are mostly provided by religious based charities. Families often have to pay for these services, as there is very little government funding. In Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan most services are run by religious based charities. But still only a small number of people who need services receive them.

In the United Arab Emirates physical access to public places has become more important and accessible taxis have been introduced. There are also new organisations that provide education, employment support and other services to adults and children with disability. Resources and supporting equipment such as wheelchairs are also now easily available.

## What role do families play in caring for people with disability?

Family is very important for all Arabic speaking people and the relationships and bonds between family members are important in supporting people with disability. Usually the mother provides the care, with other women in the family doing this after the mother's death.



How a person is treated within their family depends on the individuals concerned and varies a lot, with some people being loved, treated with dignity and encouraged to live their lives to their capacity. Increasingly, parents are also involved in the growing disability rights movement, lobbying for change, services and better treatment of people with disability.

## What do people in Arab countries know about the rights of people with disability? How has this changed over the years?

As is the case across the world, despite disability still being seen negatively, there are changes. We are beginning to change our attitudes; seeing that disability isn't the 'end of the world' and that people with disability are human beings who can contribute to the community and have a good life.

Baheej Tabara

Baheej is a member of the Lebanese Parliament who has a physical disability. His family supported and encouraged him in life and Baheej studied to be a lawyer. Later he became a judge and now he is a Member of Parliament. Baheej has been active in lobbying for rights of people with disability.

Like everywhere in Arab countries, Egyptians with disability are working for change while Lebanese people with disability have a history of peace actions during the war.

In 2002 the Conference on Disability in the Arab World was held in Beirut, mainly to discuss and launch an Arab decade for people with disability from 2003 - 2012. There are 10 areas of work for the decade which are: legislation, health, education, employment, accessibility, women with disability, children with disability, sports and leisure, media and disability, poverty and globalisation.

In the United Arab Emirates there have been great changes in a short time. Since the Rehabilitation Conference in 1996 attitudes have changed and people with disability are more visible in the streets.

Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Egypt have laws specifically protecting people with disability and the Arab decade for people with disability is viewed as a way to extend these laws across Arab countries.

## Web Sites used in writing this document

<http://hosting.menonet.net/~andalus/andalus/rehab/disability.htm>

<http://www.newint.org/issue233/liberation.htm>

[http://www.disabilityworld.org/07-08\\_01/il/kabbara.shtml](http://www.disabilityworld.org/07-08_01/il/kabbara.shtml)

[http://www.disabilityworld.org/03-04\\_01/gov/lebanon.shtml](http://www.disabilityworld.org/03-04_01/gov/lebanon.shtml)



## Disability experienced in Australia

### What is Disability?

A disability is something that stops a person from doing things they want to in their day-to-day activities. At least 19%, or one in five people in New South Wales, will experience one or more of the following:

- blindness or vision impairment (even when wearing glasses or contact lenses)
- deafness or hearing impairment (even when fitted with a hearing aid)
- chemical sensitivity
- speech difficulties in their first language
- blackouts, fits or loss of consciousness
- disorientation in unfamiliar environment
- slowness at learning or understanding
- acute anxiety
- difficulty making decisions
- incomplete use of hands or arms
- difficulty in gripping or holding or carrying small objects
- physical weakness over distance or long waiting periods
- lack of balance and coordination
- incomplete use of feet or legs
- difficulty walking on uneven ground, stairs and slopes
- pain, fatigue and discomfort
- difficulty breathing

- long term illness
- medical conditions and/or physical trauma leading to one or more of the above

In Australia disabilities are often categorised into different types, such as: physical disability (e.g. polio, arthritis, burns, obesity, broken bones, amputation), intellectual or learning disability (e.g. autism, down syndrome, attention deficit disorder), psychiatric disability or mental health problem (e.g. post traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, depression), sensory disability (deafness, blindness) and neurological disability (e.g. brain injury, spinal injury – paraplegia and quadriplegia, cerebral palsy, Parkinson’s, multiple sclerosis).

A disability can be permanent or temporary. Many people with disability say that what usually stops them from fully participating in the community is not their disability, but the barriers put up by society and the negative attitudes of the community.

### What support can people with disability get?

In Australia people with disability have the same human rights as other people. This includes having the right to be part of the community, make their own decisions and receive services that assist them to have a reasonable quality of life.

People with disability have the right to all the services people without disability can get. General community services need to provide services to people with disability. Just because somebody has a disability should not mean that they cannot get general services. In many instances people with disability can get support and assistance from the same places as people without disability.

However, to ensure that people with disability have the same opportunities there are specialist services available only to people with disability. These services include:

- Services assisting you to get a job or more training such as *Employment and Vocational services*.
- Services assisting you and your family to have a break from each other such as *Centre-based and In-Home Respite Care*.
- Services assisting you with your personal care such as *Attendant Care Services*.
- Services assisting parents when you first find out that your child has a disability such as *Early Intervention Services*.
- Services assisting mainly younger people with disability to learn more skills such as *Adult Training, Learning and Support Services, Community Access Services or Day Programs*.
- Services assisting you to live in the community with support such as *Accommodation Support Services*.
- Services assisting you with technology, equipment, therapy and para-medical specialist services, such as *PADP (Program of Appliances for Disabled People)*.
- Services assisting you to have your rights respected and to get information, such as *Advocacy and Information Services*.

### How to find out more about services for people with disability

While there are many services for people with disability, it is not easy to find out about them or find out what the right service is for you. Also sometimes the services are full and have a waiting list, or sometimes you don’t know who to ask and what service to ask for.



Here we have listed only a few services, services that say they will organise an interpreter if you need one:

The Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs is available to any person or organisation in Australia requiring interpreting services. TIS is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*TIS phone: 13 14 50*

You might have to pay a fee depending on the circumstances and depending on whom you are calling.

One good starting point to find out about things is Centrelink.

*Centrelink phone: 13 10 21*

*Centrelink Multilingual Call Centre phone: 13 12 02*

*TTY phone: 1800 810 586*

If you can go to your local Centrelink office, one good person to talk with is the Disability Officer.

Also a good place for you to start is the Commonwealth Carelink Program.

*Commonwealth CarelinkCentres phone: 1800 052 222*

*TTY phone: 1800 555 677*

*Speech-to-Speech Relay phone: 1800 555 727*

Another disability information service is IDEAS.

*IDEASphone: 1800 029 904*

You can also call the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association (MDAA) which promotes and protects the rights of people from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability and their families and carers.

*MDAA phone (02) 9891 6400 or 1800 629 072*

