

**Contextualizing Principles:  
Lebanon and Social Justice Perspectives on Disability Reform**

William Merrifield,  
Centre for Lebanese Studies

**Abstract**

The country of Lebanon continues to fall short in the implementation of rights-based legislation that supports persons with disabilities. This article presents a theoretical framework for contextualizing principles that have proven effective in the US and UK in order to mobilize social allies and reorient Lebanese societal perspectives on disability.

*Keywords:* Lebanon; socio-cultural context; disability reform

## Contextualizing Principles:

### Lebanon and Social Justice Perspectives on Disability Reform

There has been negligible progress in the measurable outputs of disability reform in the Middle East. Data released from the Arab region in 2018 reveal a low percentage of reported disability, low rates of literacy for disabled persons, low rates of educational attainment, lower school attendance rates for children and youth with disabilities, and high rates of economic inactivity and unemployment (United Nations, 2018). In contrast, there has been slow and steady progress in asserting the rights of disabled persons in the United States and United Kingdom (Beyer, 2016; Chaney, 2011; Hertel & Libal, 2011; McLeskey et al., 2013). The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has stressed the importance of changing attitudes towards persons with disabilities as an essential step toward lasting reform (United Nations, 2019; Koplewicz & Human Rights Watch, 2018). Looking at the specific case of Lebanon, I suggest that contextualizing approaches that have proven effective in the US and UK to the Lebanese socio-cultural context can help disability advocates in their efforts to mobilize social allies, reorient societal perspectives, and promote disability reform in the Arab world.

### Lebanon

Lebanon presents an interesting case for examining the nexus of culture and social justice perspectives on disability. In an area of 4,036 square miles (slightly smaller than the US state of Connecticut), Lebanon contains eighteen different religious sects each vying to preserve its own distinctive identity while at the same time participating in the shared aspects of a Lebanese national and cultural identity. The country is governed under a confessional democracy where each religious community is entitled to particular political offices in proportion to its population demographic. There has not been an official census in Lebanon since 1932 for fear that any official recorded demographic shifts will disrupt the balance of

power. Religious identity is a matter of public record with each child inheriting the religious affiliation of his or her father.

Lebanon also has a long history of political instability. From 1975 until 1990 Lebanon was embroiled in a sectarian civil war tied to regional events. Since 2005 there have been more than twelve political assassinations, a regular turnover in government, and a number of extended periods where the government has only existed in a caretaker role (“Timeline: Lebanon assassinations,” 2008). From 2014 to 2016, the country functioned without a president for 29 months (Nakoul & Perry, 2016). At present, the country is in the midst of protests in an attempt to overthrow the political class. Political instability has elevated and strengthened the importance of ethnoreligious affiliation for survival and vocational opportunities. Individual needs are met first and foremost through the community of origin instead of the political entity (Salloukh et al., 2015).

Lebanon’s long litany of conflicts has also destroyed its economic infrastructure. Many Lebanese citizens survive by depending on remittances from family members working in different countries. In 2010, Lebanon received 8.2 billion dollars in remittances with an estimated population of 4.3 million people, which constituted 22.4% of the country’s GDP, the highest in the Middle East/North Africa region (World Bank, 2011). A steady emigration of Lebanese citizens, who rely on education as a means to receive employment opportunities in more prosperous societies, has been a consequence of Lebanon’s failed economy.

As a result, Lebanon places a high value on privatized, formal education. In 2011, a World Bank report stated that approximately 61.3% of the secondary school population is enrolled in private schools (World Bank, 2011). These schools are generally run under the oversight of ethnoreligious communities (Frayha, 2016). Privatized education makes large-scale, systemic reform difficult. Abou Assali (2012), the first director of the Education Center for Research and Development (1993-1999), and Frayha (2016), the head of the ECRD from

1999-2002, provide accounts of the development, attempted implementation, and failure of educational reform in Lebanon. They contend that religious sectarianism is a formidable obstacle to achieving national and civic goals and that the protectionist mentality bred by Lebanese sectarianism makes it difficult to promote reform beyond the boundaries of sectarian self-interest.

The culture of Lebanon is generally described as collectivist (Hofstede, 2001; Joseph, 1993; Khalaf & Khalaf, 2009; McCabe et al, 2008). Whereas individualism is characterized by the subordination of the goals of the group or collective to those of the individual, collectivism involves the subordination of individual goals to those of the group (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001). In Lebanon, a person's identity is primarily constructed through her identification with a particular ethnoreligious group and is characterized by "the primacy of the family over the person....the sense of responsibility for and to others, (and) the experience of one's self as an extension of others and others as an extension of one's self" (Joseph, 1993, p.479). The elevation of the group above the individual has wide-ranging social implications for the implementation of disability reform.

### **Disability in Lebanon**

Although there are currently no official statistics on disabilities in Lebanon, persons with disabilities can register at the Ministry of Social Affairs and receive a disability card if they meet the definition of disability outlined in in Lebanese law 220/2000 (Unesco, 2013, p.8). As of January 2013, the total number of registered persons with a disability card was 2%, roughly 80,000 people of the estimated population of 4 million (Unesco, 2013). The 2% percentage of registered persons with disabilities includes the elderly population as well as people who suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes and kidney failure (Unesco, 2013). The number of persons registered as disabled in Lebanon is 13% percentage points below the estimated percentage of persons with disability worldwide (World Health Organization,

2011). In addition, the Lebanese government has stated that there are 8,558 school-age children registered with a disability. This is roughly 35,000 less than projected average estimated based on Lebanon's population of youth (Koplewicz & Human Rights Watch, 2018). It should also be noted that Lebanon has weathered a number of political conflicts which would typically result in higher number of persons with disabilities as a result of violent acts or war. Based on these figures, it is clear that cases of disability are woefully unreported.

In 2000, the Parliament of Lebanon passed law 220/2000 dealing with the rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs). This law was heavily influenced by the *World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons* (United Nations, 1997) and the *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (Damaj, 2014; United Nations, 1996) and is one of the most progressive examples of disability legislation in the Middle East. In 220/2000, disability is addressed as a rights-based issue, and the government is required to adopt policies and programs based on integration. The legislation also includes the right to health care, rehabilitation, support services, transport, housing, education and sports, and the right to employment and social benefits for persons with disabilities (Unesco, 2013). In addition, Lebanon has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which obligates states to make primary education compulsory and free to all without discrimination (Koplewicz & Human Rights Watch, 2018).

The definition of disability outlined in Lebanese law 220/2000 adopts a medical model of disability. According to the law a disabled person is defined as a person whose capacity to perform one or more vital functions, independently secure his personal existential needs, participate in social activities on an equal basis with others, and live a personal and social life that is normal by existing social standards, is reduced or non-existent because of a partial or complete, permanent or temporary,

bodily, sensory or intellectual functional loss or incapacity, that is the outcome of a congenital or acquired illness or from a pathological condition that has been prolonged beyond normal medical expectations. (Unesco, 2013, p. 8)

As the wording demonstrates, disability is constructed as the result of a congenital or acquired illness or a pathology that has not responded to treatment. Impairment is also conceptualized as something abnormal or deviant in comparison to broadly accepted cultural norms. The law uses undefined and vague language such as *vital functions*, *existential needs*, and *equal basis*. It is unclear who decides what constitutes a vital function or existential need, although the definition seems to indicate that these terms are defined according to existing social norms.

Despite the wording in law 220/2000, over the past 21 years the state has failed to implement policies to ensure access to education or reasonable educational accommodations (Unesco, 2013). For example, the law calls on the state to provide PWDs a government issued disability card that entitles PWDs to full medical coverage. Although the government has issued disability cards, a report by UNESCO demonstrates that the card gives no indication of the extent of coverage to be provided and is not accepted in practice, even in most governmental hospitals (Unesco, 2013). Damaj (2014) argues that the use of a disability card in this context fits into a general societal pattern of segregation and disabling identity labeling that works against the empowerment of PWDs. The law also states that the government is responsible for providing integrative educational services for PWDs (Unesco, 2013). Virtually none of the clauses pertaining to education have been implemented, and schools continue to refuse to accept students with disabilities (Koplewicz & Human Rights Watch, 2018; Unesco, 2013). The law stipulates that government buildings must be adapted in order to make them accessible to persons with physical disabilities by the year 2005. A study conducted by the National Assembly for Rights of the Disabled in 2006 assessed the

accessibility of 612 government institutions, public universities, hotels, restaurants, theaters, and public places. The study found that 95% of the buildings assessed still did not have proper accessibility measures (Unesco, 2013). A 2009 survey conducted by the Lebanese Physical Handicap Union revealed that only 5 of 997 public schools observed met all of Lebanon's physical accessibility standards for public buildings (Koplewicz & Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Furthermore, the law stipulates that both the public and private sectors "have to reserve 3% of jobs for people with disability in companies and firms where the number of employees exceeds 60." If a company fails to implement the outlined requirements, the law states that the company will be fined (Unesco, 2013, p. 17). This provision has not been enforced, and there are currently no fines levied for violators of the law (Unesco, 2013). According to the law, PWDs have the right to political and civic participation. In 2013, a study revealed that most voting stations continue to be inaccessible to PWDs (Unesco, 2013). Finally, a study performed by the Human Rights Watch (2018) states that cultural stigma around disability is one of the main factors that has led to children with disabilities being denied admission to schools. What is evident is that there continues to be a vast discrepancy between what is written in Lebanese law 220/2000 and what is implemented in practice.

### **Obstacles to the Implementation of Disability Reform**

Lebanon's social and educational context presents a number of challenges for the effective implementation of disability reform. Two significant obstacles disability advocates face are the societal fear of disrupting the status quo and the challenge of fighting for individual rights in a collectivist culture. Because of Lebanon's long history of ethnoreligious conflicts, there is a general penchant to avoid upsetting the social order. For example, Lebanese mothers are not allowed to pass on citizenship to their children. Although this is partially due to the patrilineal ideology that is dominant in the Arab world, the justification

for failing to give women their rights is a fear of disrupting the delicate demographics of the different religious communities (Khatib, 2008). This practice demonstrates how elevating what is construed as the collective good is seen as more important than individual rights. Disability advocates must work through how to argue for individual rights of PWDs in a culture that subordinates individual rights to what is believed to be in the best interest of the collective good.

Religious establishments in Lebanon largely dictate and control the social norms. Ethnoreligious groups are empowered by the state to create and manage their own religious courts and personal status and family laws (Nassar, 1995; Salloukh et al., 2015) For example, civil marriage is outlawed in Lebanon. If two individuals from different ethnoreligious groups want to get married, they have to get married in a different country. The social standards referenced in law 220/2000 are established and mostly controlled by the different religious establishments as opposed to a government-directed civil society. Any idea that is seen as threatening to a traditional religious belief is difficult to implement in practice (Abou Assali, 2012). A by-product of the failure of the state and the influence of the religious establishment is the primacy of one's ethnoreligious loyalty in both public and private spheres. For disability advocates this means that it is a challenge to construct an identity for the purpose of advocacy based on a shared experience of social discrimination that can compete with the deep-seated prejudices inherent in already constructed ethnoreligious identities. The influence of the religious authorities, the impotence of the state, and the broad spectrum of beliefs and prejudices represented among the different religious sects, make the implementation of a broad civil disabilities law difficult.

Another obstacle in implementing 220/2000 is Lebanon's anemic economy. As mentioned above, a large percentage of citizens are able to survive through money received from working relatives abroad. 27% of Lebanese citizens live below the poverty line



(Unesco, 2013). This does not include the large number of non-citizens such as refugees and Palestinians that also live below the poverty line (Das, 2011). There is little manufacturing, a dearth of job opportunities, and a large discrepancy between average earned income and cost of living (Hess, 2011). Khochen (2011) points out that one of the challenges of providing training for educators in special education is the high turnover in the field of education. Employers do not believe it is worthwhile to invest in professional development since many employees leave the country for more profitable jobs abroad once they have received special training (Khochen & Radford, 2011). One of the results of ethnoreligious loyalty is that jobs are often allocated based on family relationships instead of professional qualifications (Akar & Mouchantaf, 2014). Private schools are also often run like family businesses where the bottom line is more important than student welfare. These practices result in large classes, heavy teaching loads, minimal salaries, and a lack of professional development opportunities. Amr (2011) points out that according to many educators in Lebanon, “inclusive education is seen as a luxury” (p. 406).

In addition, education is highly competitive. Since education is tied to the livelihood of the extended family, there is a great deal of pressure placed on children to excel academically, primarily in the areas of medicine, business, and engineering. The high-stakes model adopted by Lebanon encourages a philosophy of teaching geared towards passing the government mandated tests thus creating an educational environment that leaves little room or financial support for addressing the needs of special education students. Students with disabilities are often seen as an unnecessary burden (Khochen & Radford, 2011). As a result, students with special needs are often segregated and removed from private schools. Damaj (2014) demonstrates this policy in her study of Lebanon’s primary school for the blind. In her research, she traces how this policy of segregation reinforces disabling social identities. Since private schools are not funded by the state, their funds come from families whose primary

concern is that *their* children excel. These factors contribute to a stigma and shame surrounding students who struggle in a traditional educational environment. Khosen (2011) points out that 82% of educators believe that it is the perceptions of the local community that hinders inclusive education (p. 146).

The privatized and ethnoreligious nature of schooling elevates sectarian agendas (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2002). The long history of instability has resulted in religious communities, not the state, providing for many of the needs of sectarian groups in a patron-client relationship. These religious communities wield significant power over educational policy and have resisted national initiatives aimed at promoting pluralism and social cohesion (Shuayb, 2012). The threat of conflict, perceived or real, is used by those in power to maintain the status quo (Nagle, 2015). Polemical and rhetorical discourse is utilized to reinforce communal identity. The prevailing educational atmosphere is characterized by a lack of trust, conflict avoidance, and protectionism (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2002; Hage, 1996). In addition, Lebanon's sectarian system reinforces collective identity, uniformity, submission to authority, and fear of the other (Jurdak & El-Amine, 2005).

In light of what has been outlined above, it is important to examine how the cultural, religious, economic, educational, political, and social contexts of Lebanon contribute to the wide-spread discrepancy between the legal rights of persons with disabilities and the ongoing perpetuation of disabling social practices in Lebanese society. It is also worthwhile to explore the extent that advancement in disability rights in the US and UK can help inform disability activism in Lebanon as well as whether contextually relevant approaches to the advocacy of the rights of persons with disabilities can be developed that will prove effective in the Lebanese context.

## Disability Rights in the USA and UK

There has been a good deal of progress made in the US and UK in the field of disability advocacy (Chaney, 2011; McLeskey et al., 2013; Watson & Vehmas, 2013). In spite of continuing challenges, there is a growing awareness of the importance and value of persons with disabilities. For example, many schools are moving away from the practices of mainstreaming and segregation and are moving toward the practice of inclusion (McLeskey et al., 2013). One justification for this move is the idea that education must be concerned with a broader focus than a defined (and limited) measure of intellectual achievement. Instead, it is argued that education must be concerned with the broader question of what is in the best interest of civil society. Proponents of inclusion have demonstrated the benefits to students, both disabled and able-bodied, when they are able to interact with a diverse student body (McLeskey et al., 2013).

The passing of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability; The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), which provides federal financial assistance to guarantee special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities; and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) which, among other things, seeks to create opportunity for the needs of students with disabilities to be met as adequately as the needs of non-disabled students, attempt to insure that PWDs are provided with rights under the authority and protection of the federal government (IDEA, 2004). These pieces of legislation are built on the belief that it is the responsibility of the state to both care for and protect the rights of its *individual* citizens, without discrimination. The implementation of this legislation works in conjunction with a judicial system in the United States that provides citizens a way to address issues of social injustice when civil rights are violated. It is the ability to enforce laws that gives legislation social power. It is also legislation like IDEA

2004 that empowers parents and gives them the authority to request testing and appropriate accommodations for their child, without personal cost. This educational paradigm conceptualizes school as a service that is set up to meet the needs of its constituents who have the right to a free appropriate public education.

Another push by disability advocates in the United States is the move away from the stigmatization that comes with creating the categories of normal and abnormal (Baynton, 2013). Disability advocates such as Lennard Davis are arguing for the normalization of diversity (Davis, 2013). The argument made is that diversity is one of the central and defining characteristics of humanity. Davis challenges the socially constructed hierarchies that use the concept of normal as a way to marginalize and oppress groups that do not fit within the categories established by those in power. The normalization of diversity attempts to elevate and develop an appreciation for the variety of ways that humanity is expressed and the worth of every individual. This approach attempts to provide a justification for the inherent worth of a person that is not measured by her ability to conform to existing social hierarchies.

A similar move made by disability advocates in the UK is to make a distinction between impairment and disability (Gleeson, 1999). The social model of disability “involves nothing more or less fundamental than a switch away from focusing on the physical limitations of particular individuals to the way the physical and social environment impose limitations upon certain categories of people” (Oliver, 1981). In this context, impairment is defined as physical, social, or emotional limitation whereas disability is understood as social exclusion (Shakespeare, 2013). The social model of disability is built on a set of dichotomies such as: (1) impairment as individual and private versus disability as structural and public; (2) a rejection of the medical model of disability and an adoption of disability as a social creation; and (3) the conviction that civil rights, rather than charity or pity, is the way to solve the disability problem (Shakespeare, 2013). In addition, the social model accepts that

concepts of impairment are historically, culturally, and socially variable (Barnes, 2013). Disability is presented as a social construction that is imposed on persons with certain types of impairments. Impairments can be visible or invisible, socially accepted or socially stigmatized. Impairment becomes a disability when societal norms or actions create a situation where a person suffers discrimination as a result of impairment. For example, a person may lack certain social skills (a social impairment) but be naturally gifted and excel in an area that does not require highly developed social skills. In this situation, an impairment (a lack of social skills) is not be construed as a disability. Whereas a different individual may excel in an area but may not be offered a promotion because of the stigma associated with his being in a wheelchair. In this example, impairment becomes disability.

The social model as outlined here is not without its critics. The rigidity of the impairment/disability dualism has the potential to normalize impairment in a way that ignores the role of the body in disability (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013) and diminish the personal experience of pain which is often a part of impairment (Crow, 1996). Conceptualizing disability as a social construct can also trivialize, or even stigmatize, the benefits of treatment for debilitating conditions (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). In spite of these critiques, the social model has generated a number of positive shifts in perceptions about disability in the UK (Barnes, 2013).

It is worthwhile to consider how advancements in the field of disability studies in the US and UK that focus on the value of persons with disability, the best interest of civil society, the protection of individual rights, the normalization of diversity, and the social construction of disability can be contextualized and applied in Lebanon's complicated social-cultural context.

### Contextualizing Principles: A Way Forward

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has stated, “it is necessary to change attitudes towards persons with disabilities in order to fight against stigma and discrimination, through ongoing education efforts, awareness-raising, cultural campaigns and communication” (Koplewicz & Human Rights Watch, 2018, pp. 25-26), a task easier said than done. I want to conclude by discussing approaches to disability reform that attempt to contextualize principles from the advancements made by the US and UK disabilities movements in ways that are relevant in Lebanon’s socio-cultural context. Although these approaches will not solve the multifaceted complexities of promoting social justice in Lebanon, they offer a possible way forward in working to reorient perspectives, develop a communal sense of responsibility, and provide for the rights of persons with disabilities in light of the limitations of Lebanon’s state institutions.

Damaj (2014) applauds the legal gains made by disability activists in Lebanon but argues that “legislation and policy need to be backed up with social measures at the field level that actively work towards redefining disability in the society” (p. 998). Damaj’s observation highlights one of the central differences between the societies of Lebanon and the US. The US system is established on the belief that power, to a large extent, resides in the law and that the state is responsible to care for the needs of its citizens without discrimination. The enforcement of the law is therefore instrumental in challenging and changing social norms. In the US, citizens generally accept the importance of the separation between religion and the state and acquiesce to the primacy of the state in enforcing law and protecting civil rights. As demonstrated above, Lebanon does not function according to these principles. Power does not primarily reside in the law but instead resides in the social norms defined by a multiplicity of ethnoreligious sects. Although the law carries some weight, it generally lacks the power to influence large-scale societal change. As a result, advocates of

disability reform must find a way to assert the rights of PWDs within the religious worldviews of different ethnoreligious communities in tandem with their efforts to advance disability legislation. For example, instead of arguing that it is in the best interest of civil society for the state to care for the needs of its individual citizens without discrimination, advocates must find a way to argue that it is in the best interest of a sectarian society for ethnoreligious sects to care for the needs of its collective members *without discrimination*.

### **From Affliction to Worth**

The social model of disability in the UK is built on the conviction that civil rights, rather than charity or pity, is the way to solve the disability problem (Shakespeare, 2013). In Lebanon, disability is often associated with the concept of *haram*. In a religious context *haram* can mean forbidden or accursed (Wehr et al., 2012). In the Lebanese social context, *haram* is an expression of pity. In the religion of Islam, there is a general emphasis on God's control of all things (Ormsby, 1984). Within the Christian tradition, there is a debate concerning the extent of God's intervention in the world (Adams & Adams, 1996) but there is still a widely accepted belief that disabilities may somehow be connected to divine intervention (Moss, Schipper, & Service, 2011). As a result, it is easy to see how disability can be construed in religious terms as God's judgment or divine affliction and, in turn, can lead to approaching disability through the lens of charity (Schumm, Stoltzfus, & Service, 2011).

I would suggest that in Lebanon it is not productive to spend a great deal of energy challenging the religious narrative of God's involvement in some capacity in disability. A focus on changing this narrative could create a dichotomy where support of the rights of PWDs is seen as threatening to religious belief. Instead, I would suggest advocates focus on reorienting religious perspectives by challenging the affliction narratives often associated with disability and, instead, push religious leaders to embrace the inherent worth of all people

based on their status as creations of God. This approach roots the UN concept of the inherent rights of all people in the religious concepts of the *Imago Dei* in the Christian tradition and *Fitrah* in the Islamic tradition. In addition, I suggest presenting research that demonstrates the ability of PWDs to engage in a multiplicity of productive and valuable activities. By educating religious authorities on the proven abilities of PWDs in conjunction with an emphasis on the uniqueness and worth of PWDs as creations of God, disability activists can seek to reorient the religious perspective on disabilities from affliction to worth and from charity and pity to honoring God, all while working toward the collective good.

This approach of dealing with the tension between religious views of morality and moral norms and the promotion of libertine freedom as an expression of individual right may not sit well with disability advocates wanting to challenge the norms and metanarratives of religious groups. Even so, I contend that it is important to find common ground among different interpretive paradigms to collaborate toward promoting social change.

### **Universal Impairment**

I would also argue that the religious nature of Lebanese society makes Davis' attempt to normalize diversity complicated and potentially ineffective. Within the religious worldviews prominent in Lebanon there are shared eschatological views of perfection. As such, the natural world and human experience are understood as falling short of an ideal. This idea makes it difficult to move from the concept of disability as a deficiency to disability as a mere difference (Bauman & Murray, 2013). I believe that it would be difficult to normalize what is seen in religious terms as a deficiency that falls short of the desired ideal. Again, the attempt to challenge or change this religious ideal is fraught with the potential difficulties of creating a dichotomy between religious understanding and disability activism that is disempowering for disability activists in Lebanon.



Instead, it may be constructive to consider the argument that impairment is an inherent characteristic of humanity (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002) and a common experience in human life (Waldschmidt, 2017). Here I believe that reorienting religious perspectives using the principles of the social model's impairment/disability paradigm can help religious leaders to understand that their religious views of the corruption in the world mean that *all* people exist on a continuum of *universal* impairment, but that it is the responsibility of the religious establishment to fight against the oppression of local, disempowering *constructions* of disability. The concept of universal impairment framed in the religious understanding of an imperfect world can help break down the stigmatization that comes from the categories of normal and abnormal and mobilize the support of religious communities in fighting against the inequities of social constructions of disability.

Again, this approach will not satisfy advocates who want to completely distance themselves from the medical model of disability or who embrace the social model because of its power to transform self-esteem. As alluded to above, the belief in healing and eschatological perfection is embedded in the prevailing Lebanese religious worldviews. These beliefs imply that impairment, on some level, is undesirable. In addition, a broad acceptance of universal impairment has the danger of trivializing the experiences and challenges related to how "different impairments impinge in different ways" (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002, p. 12; Wendell, 2013). As such, the discussion of universal impairment within the Lebanese religious context must occur hand in hand with an emphasis on the inherent worth of all people, as well as an acknowledgement that different impairments require various levels of support.

### **Oppressed to Empowered**

A final way to engage the ethnoreligious establishment to promote the rights of PWDs is to build upon religious and moral sensitivities with the objective of developing a sense of

responsibility to fight for the needs of the oppressed and empower the disempowered. Goodman (2011) contends that it is deeply held principles that are most influential in promoting action on issues of social justice. One of the problems that social justice advocates face is that there is often a disconnect between a person's moral principles and his awareness of how they relate to confronting systemic forms of injustice. Goodman (2011) argues that "for people to act on moral or spiritual principles, they need to be aware that a certain situation is, in fact, a violation of their values" and that "unless they perceive the discrepancy (of inequity) as an injustice, they will not feel that a moral wrong has been committed" (p. 142). It is therefore incumbent on disability activists to provide information, education, and research to ethnoreligious communities that challenge their status quo views on disability, that frame social justice issues in moral terms consistent with the values of their religious traditions, and that connect disabling social practice to the concept of injustice. What is helpful in Lebanon is that both Islam and Christianity have traditions of social justice as a central part of their religious ideals.

If social disability advocates in Lebanon can work to effectively reorient the status quo of religious perspectives on disability from affliction to inherent worth, disability to universal impairment, and inequity to social injustice, the potential to open the door to developing strong social allies in the fight for social justice for PWDs exists.

It is also important to discuss disability rights through a collectivist lens. The emphases in the US on individual rights and the importance of self-sufficiency do not translate well to the Lebanon context. In Lebanese society, it is interdependence, not independence, that is primarily valued. As a result, I would not recommend that disability activists import the right to self-sufficiency as a central tenet in their platform. An overemphasis on individualism has the potential to stigmatize the disability movement as a Western idea with a hidden agenda. As stated above, I would argue instead that the emphasis

needs to be on the benefit that is brought to the whole community when PWDs are given the opportunity to thrive. It may be helpful to develop a vision for the way that PWDs can contribute to the collective good when they are empowered through the provision of accommodations and services. The objective should be to reorient the cultural perspective that sees PWDs as the burden of the collective, to that of understanding and embracing the positive contributions that PWDs can make to both a particular social group and broader society when they are respected and empowered.

### **Economic Advantages of Reform**

At the state level, I suggest that disability activists attempt to make a case for the economic value of realizing the potential of PWDs. Goodman (2012) stresses the importance of the question *What's in it for me?* when individuals or groups consider social justice activism. Considering the limitations of the Lebanese state, it is helpful to demonstrate how providing for the rights of PWDs and implementing systemic changes in the state's approach to issues of disability is in the self-interest of those in power as well as the society as a whole (Goodman, 2011). The model of disabilities that is currently accepted on the state-level in Lebanon is short-sighted and based on an ideology that sees state-funded provisions for PWDs as a type of charity. When framed in these terms the importance of implementing legislation for PWDs is subordinated under more *pressing* economic needs. Goodman (2012) contends that it is important to shift the focus from only doing it *for* them (PWDs) to demonstrating how a commitment to social justice is ultimately an investment that is in the self-interest of the state. The challenge for disability activists is to make this argument in a country where an increasingly qualified work force is not necessarily advantageous in an economic climate of scarcity; and where state-building is frequently disrupted by sectarian conflicts and regional wars.

In education, disability advocates must work to demonstrate that inclusion has both social and academic benefits for both disabled and able-bodied students. In lieu of a lack of state funding, advocates must wrestle with how to convince financial stakeholders, in the form of parents whose children may be considered *typical*, that it is in their interest and the interest of their children for a school to invest in special education services. Owners of private schools must be persuaded to look beyond the bottom line, to invest in professional development of educators in spite of high turnover, and to view education in terms that are broader than economic concerns. Considering that a large number of private schools are run under the auspices of religious institutions, if activists can effectively reorient the religious perspectives as outlined above, this may lead to positive change within educational institutions.

### Conclusion

In spite of rights-based legislation that supports persons with disabilities and a signed commitment to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, Lebanon continues to fall short in the implementation of its laws. Economic and political instability have created an environment of scarcity and self-interest. The primacy of ethnoreligious identity and a culture of collectivism leave disabled communities fragmented and lacking social capital. Decentralized power in the religious courts and the impotence of the state provide little recourse for those who suffer discrimination. A largely privatized educational system framed in the competitive, instrumentalist terms of a means towards an economic end has led to the perception that inclusion and special education services are a liability or an opportunity for profit. Twenty-one years of minimal progress in the implementation of disability legislation suggest that it is time to consider new approaches. I have suggested that, through contextualizing principles in the Lebanese socio-cultural context that have proven effective in the US and UK, advocates of disability reform can mobilize allies from among its

ethnoreligious communities. Challenging affliction narratives directed at PWDs and promoting the inherent worth of all people as God's creation can reorient religious perspectives of disability based on pity and charity. Deconstructing the categories of normal and abnormal under the concept of universal impairment can empower religious leaders to work against the oppression of social constructions of disability. Tapping into religious ideals of social justice can help promote a sense of responsibility to confront systemic forms of injustice against disabled persons. Moreover, presenting research that demonstrates the ability of PWDs to contribute to the collective good can help shift ideologies that see state-funding for PWDs as a type of charity. Through contextualizing principles and seeking common ground in the midst of ethnoreligious pluralism and the challenges of sectarianism, it is possible to achieve gradual, systemic change.

## References

- Abou Assali, M. (2012). Education for social cohesion in Lebanon: The educational reform experiment in the wake of the Lebanese war. In M. Shuayb (Ed.), *Rethinking education for social cohesion: International case studies* (pp. 86–102). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire.
- Abouchedid, K., & Nasser, R. (2002). The limitations of inter-group learning in confessional school systems: The case of Lebanon. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 24(4), 61.
- Adams, R. M., & Adams, M. M. (1996). *The problem of evil*. Oxford University Press.
- Akar, B., & Mouchantaf, M. (2014). Social [in]justices of women as school principals in Lebanon. In I. Bogotch & C. M. Shields (Eds.), *International handbook of educational leadership and social (in)justice* (pp. 705–727). Springer.
- Amr, M. (2011). Teacher education for inclusive education in the Arab world: The case of Jordan. *Prospects*, 41(3), 399–413. <https://doi.org/doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11125-011-9203-9>
- Anastasiou, D., & Kauffman, J. M. (2013). The social model of disability: Dichotomy between impairment and disability. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* (United Kingdom), 38(4), 441–459. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jmp/jht026>
- Ayyash-Abdo, H. (2001). Individualism and collectivism: The case of Lebanon. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 29(5), 503. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2001.29.5.503>
- Barnes, C. (2013). Understanding the social model of disability: Past, present and future. In *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (pp. 14–31). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203144114-10>

- Bauman, H., & Murray, J. (2013). Deaf studies in the 21st century: “Deaf-gain” and the future of human diversity. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 239–253). Routledge.
- Baynton, D. (2013). Disability and the justification of inequality in American history. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 16–33). Routledge.
- Beyer, S. (2016). Commentary on “Employment for all: United States Disability Policy.” In *Tizard Learning Disability Review* (Vol. 21, Issue 3, p. 162). Pier Professional Ltd.
- Chaney, P. (2011). Education, equality and human rights: Exploring the impact of devolution in the UK. *Critical Social Policy*, 31(3), 431–453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018311405013>
- Crow, L. (1996). Including all our lives. In J. Morris (Ed.), *Encounters with strangers: Feminism and disability*. London: Women’s Press.
- Damaj, M. (2014). The overpowering role of policies in constructing social identities of children with disabilities. In I. Bogotch & C. M. Shields (Eds.), *International handbook of educational leadership and social (in)justice* (pp. 993–1021). Springer.
- Das, Rupean. (2011). *Profiles of poverty: The human face of poverty in Lebanon*. Dar Manhal al Hayat.
- Davis, L. J. (2013). Introduction: Normality, power, and culture. In *The disability studies reader* (pp. 1–16). Routledge.
- Frayha, N. (2016). Pressure groups, education policy, and curriculum development in Lebanon A policy maker’s retrospective and introspective standpoint. In R. G. Sultana & A. E. Mazawi (Eds.), *Arab “World” : Political projects, struggles, and geometries of Power* (pp. 93–113). Routledge.

- Gleeson, B. (1999). *Geographies of disability*, Routledge.
- Goodman, D. J. (2011). *Promoting diversity and social justice: Educating people from privileged groups* (Second Edi). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hage, G. (1996). Nationalist anxiety or the fear of losing your other. *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 7(2), 121.
- Hertel, S., & Libal, K. (2011). *Human rights in the United States: Beyond exceptionalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hess, J. Stephen. (2011). *The Lebanese way: A cultural propensity toward entrepreneurship*. American University of Beirut.
- Hofstede, G. H. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Joseph, S. (1993). Connectivity and patriarchy among urban working-class arab families in Lebanon. *Ethos*, 21(4), 452–484.
- Jurdak, M., & El-Amine, A. (2005). Reform of general education: Case study on Lebanese curricula reform. In A. El Amine (Ed.), *Reform of general education in the Arab world* (pp. 55–76). UNESCO.
- Khalaf, S., & Khalaf, R. S. (2009). *Arab society and culture: An essential reader* (S. Khalaf & R. S. Khalaf, Eds.). London.
- Khatib, L. (2008). Gender, citizenship and political agency in Lebanon. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35(3), 437–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530190802525189>



- Khochen, M., & Radford, J. (2011). Attitudes of teachers and headteachers towards inclusion in Lebanon. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(2), 139–153.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603111003671665>
- Koplewicz, S., & Human Rights Watch. (2018). “I would like to go to school”: Barriers to education for children with disabilities in Lebanon.
- McCabe, D. L., Feghali, T., & Abdallah, H. (2008). Academic Dishonesty in the Middle East: Individual and Contextual Factors. *Research in Higher Education*, 49(5), 451–467.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-008-9092-9>
- McLeskey, J., Rosenberg, M. S., & Westling, D. L. (2013). *Inclusion: Effective practices for all students*. Pearson.
- Moss, C. R., Schipper, J., & Service, S. (Online. (2011). *Disability studies and biblical literature* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan US. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137001207>
- Nagle, J. (2015). Between entrenchment, reform and transformation: Ethnicity and Lebanon’s consociational democracy. *Democratization*, 1–21.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1058361>
- Nakoul, S., & Perry, T. (2016). *Lebanon’s Aoun wins presidency to end two year political vacuum* | Reuters. Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-presidency-session-idUSKBN12V102>
- Nassar, J. R. (1995). Sectarian political cultures: The case of Lebanon. *Muslim World*, 85(3-4), 246–265. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1995.tb03621.x>
- Oliver, M. (1981). A new model of the social work role in relation to disability. In *The handicapped person: A new perspective for social workers?*, (pp. 20–39). RADAR

- Ormsby, E. L. (1984). *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The dispute over Al-Ghazali's best of all possible worlds*. Princeton University Press.
- Salloukh, B. F., Barakat, R., Al-Habbal, J. S., Khattab, L. W., & Mikaelian, S. (2015). *Politics of sectarianism in postwar Lebanon* (R. Barakat, J. S. Al-Habbal, L. W. Khattab, & S. Mikaelian, Eds.). Pluto Press.
- Schumm, D., Stoltzfus, M., & Service), S. (Online. (2011). *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred texts, historical traditions, and social analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan US.  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230339491>
- Shakespeare, T., & Watson, N. (2002). The social model of disability: An outdated ideology? *Research in Social Science and Disability*, 2, 9–28.
- Shakespeare, T. (2013). The social model of disability. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 207–214). Routledge.
- Shuayb, Maha. (2012). *Rethinking education for social cohesion: International case studies* (Maha Shuayb, Ed.). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire.
- Timeline: Lebanon assassinations - Al Jazeera English*. (2008).  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2007/12/2008525172717634160.html>
- Unesco. (2013). *Social inclusion of young persons with disabilities (PWD) in Lebanon* (Issue September).
- United Nations. (1996). *The standard rules on the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities*. UN : Stationery Office [distributor].

United Nations. (2019). *Disability and development report: Realizing the sustainable development goals by, for and with persons with disabilities: 2018*. UN.

<https://doi.org/10.18356/a0b1b1d1-en>

United Nations. (1997). *World programme of action concerning disabled persons*. United Nations Department of Public Information.

United Nations. (2018). *Disability in the Arab region*. ESCWA.

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2010). *Free appropriate public education for students with disabilities: Requirements under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. Washington, D.C.

Waldschmidt, A. (2017). Disability goes cultural: The cultural model of disability as an analytical tool. *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, December, 19–27.

Wehr, H., Cowan, J. M., & Wehr, H. (2012). *A dictionary of modern written Arabic*. Snowball Publishing.

Wendell, S. (2013). Unhealthy disabled: Treating chronic illnesses as disabilities. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 156–168). Routledge.

World Bank. (2011). *Migration and remittances factbook 2011*. World Bank.

World Health Organization. (2011). *World report on disability: 2011*. World Health Organization.

 Contextualizing Principles:

**Lebanon and Social Justice Perspectives on Disability Reform** by William Merrifield  
<https://rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/972> is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#). Based on a work at <https://rdsjournal.org>.