

Non-violent resistance and reform in Lebanon

The experience of the Lebanese disability movement

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The disability cause has been omitted from the political agenda of governments and political parties in Lebanon for some time. The civil war left thousands of Lebanese people with different forms of disability, both physical and psychological. There are no clear statistics for the number of people injured or left disabled because of the war, but government figures show that out of 77,000 registered to get a disability card in Lebanon, 57 per cent have a physical disability, and that many of these are from war injuries. Mental illness is not officially recognised as a disability in Lebanon.

Militias were first to respond to disability issues during the war. Supported by religious and other social groups, they built medical and rehabilitation institutions and programmes to deal with injured and handicapped militia fighters and civilians from their own communities.

In the 1980s disabled people began to organise themselves outside of any form of Lebanese patronage – from traditional institutions or from militias. Disabled people's organisations (DPOs) tried to move away from a remedial model of organisation focusing on care and rehabilitation, towards a rights-based policy approach. Supported by international non-governmental organisations, Lebanese DPOs developed creative programmes and activities that have helped to stimulate a shift in social attitudes towards disability.

From the DPOs' perspective, the most important innovation was the adoption of a new and expanded discourse. Instead of focusing exclusively on disability issues, Lebanese DPOs looked to participate actively in anti-war and anti-violence movements, and to defend the human rights of all Lebanese people. A universal human rights approach was seen as the

correct path to achieve rights for people with disability, and Lebanese DPOs and prominent disabled people began to support anti-war and anti-violence activities.

The anti-war movement and disability rights: cooperative strength

Lebanon's anti-war movement started as soon as the Lebanese civil war began. A few months after violence broke out prominent religious leaders led by Imam Moussa Sadr, head of the Shiite Islamic Council, called for a hunger strike until the violence stopped. In 1977 a group of well-known intellectuals and journalists formed 'The Gathering for a United Lebanon', calling for secularisation and the dismantling of all militia forces.

The first popular action against the war began on 6 May 1984 and was led by a young female university student, Iman Khalifeh. She called on all Lebanese opposed to the war and militia control of the country to gather around the demarcation line in the Museum area of central Beirut in order to commemorate Martyrs' Day in Lebanon. As 6 May approached it became clear that the campaign had been gaining momentum and a large turn-out was expected, with the press widely reporting the reactions of trade and teachers' unions and other civil society organisations (CSOs). Many DPOs also welcomed the call. However, on 5 May two opposing militia forces began bombarding the planned gathering area, and the organisers were forced to cancel the event.

Even though the event did not take place, the circumstances of the demonstration revealed that militia forces were losing popular support – the bombing exposing militias' fears of how successful the demonstration was likely to have been. Furthermore, the organisers of the event gained



A disabled man and his colleagues, some of them victims of Lebanon's civil war, send a strong message to Lebanon's political leaders as they depart for talks in Qatar, May 2008 // © AFP/Getty Images

confidence in their capacity to rally the Lebanese people against the war.

In response, the non-violent movement was established in Lebanon in 1985. It included some of the leaders of the 6 May event and other activists – including prominent feminist leaders, youth leaders and some religious anti-war personalities – as well as from within DPOs. The movement launched a blood donation campaign as a demonstration of solidarity among all Lebanese. In October 1985, supported by the Lebanese Red Cross, a tent where people could give blood was erected on a main highway in the Dowra area of eastern Beirut. But despite enthusiasm from the Lebanese public to donate, an hour after the tent was assembled local militia forced the organisers to close it down.

The anti-war rationale of the disability movement was twofold. First, with the state paralysed and the country in turmoil because of the war, it could not demand particular rights for disabled people but had to join with other forces to struggle for the rights of all Lebanese for peace and security. Second, Lebanese civil society was not taking the lead in opposing militia forces, and so the Lebanese disabled community needed to show the way as the most vivid reminder of the war and as proof that persons with disabilities are key national and social actors, equal to other groups in the country.

Later in 1985, in response to the sabotage of the blood campaign, DPOs, with the support of the non-violence movement, decided to organise twin marches by disabled people, from East and West Beirut to meet in the centre of the capital and demand the end of the war. The March was planned for Independence Day on 22 November. However, as the march got underway the two main militias controlling West Beirut started fighting each other in the streets and the marchers were caught in the crossfire.

In October 1987 the disability movement organised another anti-war march, this time across the country from north to south as a civil challenge to the militia order. Although it was led once again by persons with disabilities, Lebanese CSOs joined them to strengthen the popular impact of the demonstration. This also helped disability become a prominent national cause and gain significant support across a range of sectors in civil society.

The success of the march further encouraged other CSOs to protest the violence. By late October 1987 the teachers' union called for a general strike against the war and on 9 November the national trade union organised the largest anti-war gathering yet in central Beirut, involving an estimated 300,000 people. Building on these successes, from 1987–89 the Lebanese disability movement began organising a series of camps and seminars to promote

human rights, non-violence and disability rights, as well as blood donation campaigns and sit-ins.

Post-war

After the official end of the war in 1989, DPOs developed a new strategy based on two pillars: 1) to consolidate disability rights by lobbying for a new disability law; and 2) to maintain the disability movement as an avant garde social force working to strengthen social peace and reconciliation in the country and to push for reform.

DPOs' rights-based approach was opposed by traditional institutions, which are based on charitable and care models and work largely in conjunction with established political society. But achieving a new disability law would require active lobbying of the new post-war political establishment. The fact that disabled peoples' active engagement in peace campaigns during the war had gained popular support gave DPOs confidence. DPOs began lobbying the first post-war national coalition government after its establishment in 1991. This resulted in the formation in 1992 of the first National Council on Disability, a government-appointed council with a single objective: to develop an official disability policy. This campaign culminated in the launch of a disability registration card and the adoption by parliament of law 220/2000 on disability.

Meanwhile the disability movement continued its efforts to consolidate social peace in Lebanon, working in alliance with human rights and civil society organisations. Between 1992 and 2006 Lebanon witnessed a series of international and internal violent clashes as a result of the ongoing confrontation between the Lebanese resistance and Israel. The Lebanese disability movement was very active in responding to humanitarian challenges related to the displacement of Lebanese from the south to Beirut and other Lebanese areas as a result of the Israeli military interventions in 1993, 1996 and 2006. This included blood donation campaigns and the provision of equipment and shelter for displaced persons with disabilities, in particular in the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli war.

The situation today: civil solidarity for social and political change?

The anti-war and anti-violence movement has lost momentum and strength since the official end of the civil war, despite the fact that hostilities in Lebanon (domestic and international) are still going on today. Campaigns to

consolidate reforms and push for the rule of law have been diffuse and have proved ineffective.

Post-war, the disability movement has been almost left alone in its attempt to transform disability into a rights-based issue. Today, CSO discourse, including those working for women, children and human rights, rarely include disability as a key issue. DPOs have had only limited success in securing greater participation for disabled people in elections, to convert their constituency into a political force for change. People with disabilities have had some success at the local level in getting elected to municipal boards in selected Lebanese regions, but they have yet to gain access to national parliament.

Lebanese CSOs have also failed to become a strong political force. A rights-based approach in all issues – women, children, environment – is not having the desired impact, due to sectarian divisions and the lack of a rights-based culture in influential Arab countries like Syria and Saudi Arabia. It remains to be seen what impact the 'Arab Spring' may have. Laws on disability and environmental protection are still far from being implemented. Proposed laws and regulations regarding violence against women face major resistance from Islamic religious institutions.

In fact, every part of Lebanese civil society is working independently from each other. For example, women's and human rights organisations do not coordinate to strengthen their lobbying capabilities. One reason for this is that women's organisations are not prepared to adopt a sufficiently radical feminist discourse that might pit them against powerful Lebanese religious institutions. Many CSOs are also wary of antagonising political society, at the risk of losing the financial and political support that the state and politicians provide. Many CSO leaders also harbour political ambitions themselves.

To make a real difference, Lebanese civil society needs to join together, to adopt a holistic approach in dealing with all issues – as the Lebanese disability movement did during the war – turn the fight for one into a fight for all.

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