

## ***Richard G. Wilkins***

### **“Project WORLD: Women and the International Landscape of Women with Disabilities”**

The Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development (DIIFSD) recently completed a worldwide study on the status and needs of children with disabilities and their families entitled *Children and the International Landscape of Disabilities* (Project CHILD, 2010). While documenting the status and needs of children with disabilities, two critical areas warranting further research emerged: (1) the disproportionately adverse effects of disabilities on women and girls and (2) the pervasive social, economic, and health impacts on women in their universal roles as caregivers of children and family members with disabilities. Through the voices of the disability experts interviewed for Project CHILD, the particular impact of disability on women and girls became apparent.

Women with disabilities are much more likely to be impoverished and denied basic human rights than are men with disabilities. Specifically, women with disabilities experience:

- greater incidence of physical and sexual abuse;
- fewer opportunities for marriage;
- greater likelihood of living in absolute poverty;
- higher rates of illiteracy; and
- less access to education, employment, rehabilitation services, and health care.

Additionally, as daughters, sisters, aunts, wives and mothers; women are disproportionately more likely to be the sole care giver for family members with disabilities, impacting every facet of their lives. Research documents that women, in the absence of adequate support, who serve as caregivers for family members with disabilities are at greater risk for experiencing:

- emotional and psychological stress;
- health and medical problems;
- negative stigma;
- loss of employment and income;
- abandonment by their husbands; and
- social isolation.

Mothers often describe feelings of guilt or self-blame regarding both heredity and environmental factors contributing to their child’s disability, even when unwarranted. With the majority of children with disabilities being cared for by their mothers, more effort

is needed to understand their unique personal and family circumstances and design successful interventions, supports and empowerment programs for these women and their families.

DIIFSD is building upon the knowledge acquired during Project CHILD by applying a similar research model to the interplay of women, family, and disability around the world. This project, entitled Women's Roles in the Landscape of Disabilities (Project WORLD), will provide a wealth of information about women and girls impacted by disability. Project WORLD will identify the fundamental issues through personal interviews and group discussions, as well as highlight programs of promise and best practices that serve to empower women and girls with disabilities, while contributing to the ongoing development of an international resource guide on disabilities. Like Project CHILD, Project WORLD will increase awareness and foster change by providing a global voice concerning the impact of disabilities on women. Whereas, Project CHILD focused on voices about children with disabilities who cannot always speak for themselves, Project WORLD's emphasis will be global conversations with women who can.