

Dear friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to be present here today at the third annual mental health conference on Prevention and Management of Mental Handicaps in the Palestinian Community in Lebanon. I have had the privilege to see the work Beit Atfal Assumoud and their Family Guidance Centers are doing, and I can only say that I am impressed and also proud that Norway, through Norwac, is supporting your work both financially and through guidance from professionals.

Mental health is an issue that is met with prejudices in most parts of the world- probably because it is less concrete than physical illnesses for example. Prejudices also occur more frequently in societies without a proper mental health care. This is quite natural – as most of us are afraid of the things we don't know anything about.

Therefore the work done by the Family Guidance Centers is so important. Not only is the fact that you are providing help to people that are in need important, but the fact that you through your work is raising awareness and through that steadily tear down the walls of prejudices are as important.

In many ways it seems quite obvious that the Palestinian communities in Lebanon are harder hit by mental health problems than other parts of the population, even though I would assume that the many years with wars and conflicts have resulted in a higher frequency in mental illnesses also among the Lebanese population. Reading statistics about the state of the mental health of the Palestinian population is heartbreaking. I will not go into details here, as you all know this much better than me.

My point is only that the statistics give clear evidence and extremely good arguments for why the work of Beit Atfal Assumoud and the family guidance centers are needed. The nature of the problems – like women being particularly vulnerable due to their worries about their children, and young people having a very negative view on their future- also shows that your holistic approach is of utmost importance. If a child in a family suffers, it seldom has longterm effects if his or her family is not involved.

At the same time – if we don't look after our children, I'm afraid we've lost. We can't afford to have children that don't believe in the future and we can't tolerate society and grown ups not doing anything they can do make life better for the young generation.

That is why your work is so important – through raising awareness about mental health and helping people. And not the least- by seeing people you are helping them to believe in themselves. All of us needs to be seen and accepted as what we are.

So, good luck in your future work and all the best for the conference.