

Bioethical Issues for Women discussed at the 5th Regional Conference of the Salim El Hoss Bioethics and Professionalism Program

In the Arab world, tradition, norms and customs continue to be the most important determinant governing the status of women. Gender imbalances persist with gender-blind legislation, discriminatory practices in the workplace and unequal opportunities in the political, economic, social and legal spheres, and naturally limited access to adequate health services, particularly reproductive health.

Adopting a multidisciplinary approach to address "bioethics" with national and regional committees coordinating pluralistic debates; reinforcing the role of the state in regulation and protection of personal freedom and choices; strengthening "bioethics" committees in governments and scientific societies and universities as well as extracting reproductive health regulations from local religious jurisdictions and fatwas and applying universal laws, were only few of the recommendations to advance women's situation in the Arab world from experts hailing from Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Sudan and Tunisia to the 5th regional conference organized by the Salim El-Hoss Bioethics and Professionalism Program (SHBPP) at the American University of Beirut Medical Center (AUBMC).

Held on Saturday, February 8 at the Gefinor Rotana Hotel in Beirut and titled "Bioethics Issues for Women: Ethics of reproductive health - Social and political conditions in Arab countries", this conference, discussing the challenges and bioethical issues for women regarding reproductive health and the impact of the social and political conditions on women's health in Arab countries, is the first regional activity of the "Bioethics Network on Women's Issues in the Arab region (BiNWIAR)", after the establishment of its advisory board in September 2013.

The first half of the day featured presentations covering a wide array of issues revolving around the theme of wellbeing of women in the Arab world and relevant ethical questions. An opening speech from Deputy VP/Dean and Associate Dean of Clinical Affairs, Dr. Ziyad Ghazzal, representing Raja N. Khuri Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Vice President of Medical Affairs, Dr. Mohamed Sayegh, asserted the historical leadership and pioneering role of the Faculty of Medicine in bioethics, with The Salim el Hoss Bioethics and Professionalism Program (SHBPP) the first of its kind in the region. "As part of our AUBMC 2020 Vision, we are committed to be advancing patient-centered care, education and research to heights that have never been seen before in our region. Bioethics is a critical part of this vision," stated Dr. Ghazzal.

Associate Dean and Professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Dr. Jocelyn Dejong, representing the Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, Dr. Iman Nuwayhid welcomed participants to the pioneering conference and Founding Director of SHBPP and founding member and advisory board member at BiNWIAR, Dr. Thalia Arawi expressed the honor of the AUB FM-based Salim El Hoss Bioethics and Professionalism Program to "be able to hold the first conference on bioethics issues for women and the first advisory board meeting in Lebanon." In her welcoming note, she speaks of the network's aim of "contributing to the welfare of women through the exchange of information and joining the efforts among experts and organizations in the region," she said. Dr. Arawi presented the main bioethical issues that women in the Arab region face, mainly early marriage, pregnancy among young women refugees, hymenoplasty, gestational surrogacy, female genital mutilation, gender based violence, access to healthcare, ageing, "gendercide" as well as women's participation to research.

Programme Specialist at the Social and Human Sciences Department at the UNESCO Cairo Office, Mrs. Orio Ikebe deliberated further on BiNWIAR. Initiated in 2011 by UNESCO Cairo Office, the Regional Documentation and Information Center on Bioethics and Ethics of Science and Technology (RDIC-BEST) of the Academy of Scientific Research and Technologies in Egypt and several experts from the Arab Region, BiNWIAR is a network of individuals and institutions established to plan activities and share information and experience "to seek solutions from ethical perspectives for the problems women in the Arab World are facing related to health care, treatment and research."

A presentation on the challenges to reproductive health needs in Algeria by Professor and Director of Research at the Laboratory of Genetic Sciences, Dr. Khedidja Allia, discussing the evolution in the Algerian demographic map and the organization of health systems in Algeria to meet the challenges of the millennium, was the first in a series of presentations from across the Arab region.

Presentations also discussed the ethical implications of socio-political conditions in Arab countries on research involving Arab women by Doctoral Researcher at the University of Birmingham Ghaiath Hussein; future threats to Arab women's health by Clinical Professor at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at AUBMC, Dr. Adnan Mroueh; bioethical challenges in reproductive health care in the context of Lebanon and the region by Clinical Associate at AUBMC's Women's Health Center Dr. Faysal El Kak; as well as reproductive health in occupied Palestinian territory by the Director of Ramallah-based Welfare Association, Tafeeda Jarbawi, and violence against women in Tunisia by President and Director General of the National Board for Family and Population (ONFP) of Tunis.

The second half of the day was dedicated to BiNWIAR's first advisory board meeting held "to adopt a road map of the network to translate various issues identified during the conference into concrete actions," announced Dr. Arawi.