

# Shafallah forum ends

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DOHA: The Shafallah Center's fourth Annual International Forum on Children with Special Needs concluded yesterday.

The three-day forum gathered disability experts to discuss independence for the disabled and poverty-reduction strategies amid the global economic downturn.

Participants in the forum discussed ways to provide access to education, micro-enterprise and employment opportunities to the disabled. Forum co-chair Cherie Blair, wife of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, said independence for those with special needs would be a powerful agent of change, both domestically and internationally.

"While the world focuses on economic recovery, it's even more vital that the voices of people with disabilities are heard. Disabled people have a right to be included as equal citizens, a right to a better deal in society and a right to increasing opportunities. But it's not just an issue of human rights. I know how powerfully things can change for the better when disabled people and non-disabled people join together and use all their talents. That's how we strengthen not only our economies but our societies too," said Cherie Blair.

The other speakers at the forum included keynote speaker Katie Meade, Best Buddies Friendship Ambassador, Bob and Suzanne Wright, co-founders of Autism Speaks, and Dr Mary Ellen Lewis, director of Educational Projects, Kennedy Krieger Institute, to mention a few. Additionally, experts from around the world, from as far as Australia, South Africa, Malaysia, and the United States, were present, as well as some of the top experts in disability in the Middle East. The speakers represented a diverse range of institutions, including the World Bank, the Peace Corps Volunteers and the University of Sydney.

H H Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, who opened the forum, has promoted "the right of every individual to be educated, to work in a healthy environment and the right to be an independent and contributing member of society."

She said Qatar had been trying to improve the lives of all its citizens, including citizens with special needs. "The state is working to develop better rehabilitation services, provide a suitable environment in buildings, roads and public spaces, and in training programmes for institutions to encourage the inclusion of these precious citizens in the work place. In fact, we have adopted a legislation which requires two percent of all government jobs and those in public institutions to be set aside for people with special needs."

Shafallah's Chairman, Hassan Ali bin Ali, said he was pleased with the outcome of the forum and its reform agenda.

"Each year we gather together the world's leading experts and advocates for people with disabilities. We explore key scientific and cultural issues in the field and we attempt to move forward together to address them. While we come from every corner of the globe, we all share a basic purpose and values: we all love our children, and we all wish for them a future of opportunity and equality. This forum has helped make such a future possible," said Ali.



Sameera Al Qassimi, Deputy Managing Director of Shafallah Center, and Andrew Nebel, UK Director of Marketing and Communications of Barnardo's, sign a partnership agreement between the two organisations yesterday. IBRAHIM R O