

Child rights bill aims to protect, not destroy, the Jordanian family



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JORDAN'S child rights bill for the year 2022 is about making sure children are protected, and get treated with the affection and respect they deserve by everyone they come in contact with, including their parents and teachers. It is not about conspiring to dismantle the nuclear family, nor is it an attempt to open the door to Western-style family systems to infiltrate into the Jordanian society.

Unlike claims made on social media and by some conservative MPs who discussed the bill at the inception of Parliament's extraordinary session last Wednesday, the draft law strikes a good balance between child protection and the more conservative aspects of Jordanian society.

Across several of its articles, the children's rights bill shows thoughtful respect for the Jordanian context and by no means attempts to remove the nuclear family from the country's social fabric, as some have claimed.

Article 48 explicitly says that in child welfare cases (as defined in Article 43), the Ministry of Social Development should exert all efforts "as far as possible" to guarantee that "the child is kept in his (or her) family environment", making sure that "the child is not separated from his (or her) parents". It adds that children should be "returned to them as soon as possible".

Article 43, on the other hand, details the types of actions that may put children in harm's way by exposing them to "violence, mistreatment, and exploitation". The article lists undermining child safety and integrity through "human trafficking, prostitution, pornographic exploitation, and any other forms of sexual abuse" as a violation of a child's welfare. This in addition to violating their right to a healthy childhood by taking advantage of them via economic activity (such as child labor), neglecting their needs or denying them access to education.

Some conservative MPs have gone as far as to

accuse the bill of contradicting Islamic Sharia, but most of the subversive actions mentioned in Article 43 are in fact dangerous criminal transgressions that can cause serious irreversible psychological and bodily damage to children.

Some people seem to have misunderstood the purpose of Article 44, which states that being a parent or a legal guardian does not give an adult "the excuse to commit" harmful acts that may undermine the child's safety through "negligence, violence, mistreatment, exploitation, assault on (the child's) physical safety, detaining him (or her against their will), or any actions that may affect the emotional and psychological balance of the child".

In Islam, treating children with love and affection has been mentioned in several hadiths and stories relayed to us by the Prophet Mohammad's companions. In an anecdote narrated by Abu Hurayra, the Prophet once gave his small grandson, Al-Hassan, a kiss. To this, a man commented: "I have ten children and I have never (once) kissed any of them." The Prophet looked at him and said: "Whoever does not show mercy will not be shown mercy."

This story is not about a father lashing his children with a leather belt whenever he loses his temper for no good reason. It is not about a mother sadistically shoving hot pepper into her child's mouth to teach a lesson in obedience, nor is it about a parent or an uncle chaining a girl to a pole and beating her to death because she came back home late. It is about not showing children affection at a very basic human level.

This moral tale is a reminder that Islam does not condone violence against children, nor does it give parents the right to treat them with disdain or abuse. It shows us that upbringing should be guided by mercy, which in modern language translates into "the child's best interests".

Although Islam came to free the oppressed from ill-treatment, slavery, and predatory monetary prac-

tices, somehow Arab societies have slowly but surely reverted to pre-Islam models of tribalism that justify violence against children. In pre-Islam, tribes in the Arabian Peninsula used to bury their first-born daughters alive to make way for a first-born son. This particular practice was banned by Islam.

But notions of cruelty, unbridled ego, social showiness, and infatuation with outward image have made their way back to our societies, which more often than not prefer to keep abuse against girls and boys under wraps to protect the name of the family.

Sadly, a study published late last year by UNICEF and the National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA) showed that child abuse is a serious problem in Jordan, with a staggering 74.6 percent of children experiencing at least one form of physical violence from their parents, legal guardians and teachers, not to mention other forms of abuse.

According to 2019 statistics, children make up around 40 percent of the population. They are Jordan's future doctors, lawyers, and parents; denying them a healthy childhood will risk maiming their future as healthy adults capable of giving their own children a healthy and stable life.

How we treat each other, especially our most vulnerable, is a measure of our humanity. To heartlessly beat up children for years on end, denying them the chance to live in peace and stability, is a crime and a violation of the sanctity of human life.

To break the cycle of violence against children, the child rights bill is one step in the right direction; a step that will help us build a healthy society that empowers children and gives them wings to reach their highest potential.

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