

Child rights and Islam

Christian Salazar Volkmann

A greater engagement with Islamic thinkers is overdue in order to facilitate debate about child rights in Muslim societies and beyond.

Interpreting and applying the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is complicated. There are international organisations whose mandate is to interpret the meaning of children's rights and monitor the Convention's application in individual countries. However, the norms and standards set by international bodies are also debated by national government officials, civil society activists and intellectuals.

Religious leaders often play a pivotal part in this process. They have a strong influence in many societies and guide the thinking and action of millions of believers. They possess the moral authority to influence social opinions and behaviour especially in regard to marriage, family life and education. This is true not only for countries where religion is the political foundation of the state but also in societies where state and religion are separated.

It is important for the worldwide application of child rights to foster deeper understanding about them and Islam. UNICEF has entered into dialogue with Islamic scholars by highlighting congruencies between Islam and international standards. This dialogue started before the

adoption of the CRC in 1989. In 1985 a study was undertaken by Al Azhar University in Cairo on child care in Islam. In 2005 a joint report by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)¹, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and UNICEF underlined common goals in realising children's rights. The focus of these studies was mainly on social rights, leaving aside the more controversial areas of civil and political rights.

In Iran UNICEF collaborated with Mofid University in Qom in a comprehensive research project: the analysis of the different articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child from an Islamic perspective. The research was based on the Quran, relevant hadiths, fatwas and other religious and scientific sources and aimed at generating and contributing to a comprehensive body of theological guidance and interpretation for Islamic researchers and academics on child rights.

It is not only important that Muslim religious leaders increase their understanding of international child rights standards. The non-Islamic world needs to benefit more

from Islamic thinking on this matter. Therefore we must make the most of opportunities for international dialogue between Islamic and non-Islamic, religious and non-religious thinkers, researchers and practitioners on child rights and on the more difficult issue of women's right.

A greater engagement of Islamic thinkers and researchers with child rights is overdue as Western legal experts and academics have largely dominated international interpretations of human rights norms. There is also rich Islamic thinking on matters related to child rights and social justice which can help to advance the realisation of social rights of children in many countries of the world. International human rights institutions therefore should

maximise opportunities for dialogue on children's and women's rights. In my experience there is a space for such a dialogue between child rights advocates and Islamic leaders. The common ground for improving the situation of children is much larger than the areas where differences exist.

Christian Salazar Volkmann was the UNICEF Representative in Iran at the time of writing. UNICEF Iran supported the production of the first edition of this special supplement of FMR on Islam, human rights and displacement as a contribution to international awareness and dialogue about child rights and Islam.

1. Now Organization of Islamic Cooperation.