



Children’s Right to Entertainment in Jordan: A Pressing Demand, not a Frivolous Indulgence

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Introduction

Do children in Jordan enjoy their right granted by the constitution to enjoy leisure, play, and participate in clubs and gatherings suitable for their age, as is the case in most developed countries and those that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child? What about the children of the governorates beyond the capital? Do they have the opportunities available in the capital, for example? How many children's clubs, public gardens, and parks are there in the governorates? Does the government allocate an annual budget for establishing and maintaining children's parks in urban areas?

In 1991, Jordan signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention was shelved throughout the successive governments until the National Council for Family Affairs presented it to the National Assembly in 2006, which in turn approved the Convention under Law No. 50 of the same year. The agreement completed its constitutional stages, with Jordan having reservations about three articles related to adoption and the freedom to change sex and religion¹. The Council had announced the start of preparing a draft child protection law at the end of 2015 to provide a general legal reference for children's rights, cover legislative gaps, and submit the draft to the Cabinet of Jordan in March 2019, but its approval was delayed.

The approved child law in its current version of 2022 guarantees every child in Jordan the right to leisure in accordance with Article 18 of the Child Protection Law, which states that "all children are entitled to form associations and clubs through which they can pursue their social and cultural activities, and play games and sports as befits their age and maturity, under the laws in force."² Jordanian legislation came to guarantee this right, as the law stipulates that every child has the right to rest and play in their spare time, "subject to the guardians' or caregivers' rights, all children are entitled to form associations and clubs through which they can pursue their social and cultural activities, and play games and sports as befits their age and maturity, following the laws in force."³

However, the actual application of these articles varies significantly in terms of the quantity and quality of recreational spaces available to children. This paper focuses on the quantitative availability of gardens and public parks accessible to children. Too often, children are left to fend for themselves when it comes to finding ways to occupy their time, which has serious health and social consequences. This paper sheds light on some aspects of this gap and directs the concerned authorities to some proposals that provide children in all governorates with safe and public means of entertainment.

The gap in the right for leisure in Jordanian urban setting

Jordanian society is youthful. For example, in 2018, the percentage of children in Jordan amounted to more than 40% of the population, with 3.8 million children, according to UNICEF⁴.

¹ BBC Arabic, Does the Child Rights Draft Law Contravene Society Norms?, 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/interactivity-62592028>

² Al Mamlaka, "Al Mamlaka" publishes the full text of the Child Rights Draft Law, 2022. <https://ncfa.org.jo/en/wrsht-hshd>

³ National Council for Family Rights, "Child Rights Law No. 17 of 2022." shorturl.at/fiqW1

⁴UNICEF, Children of Jordan n.d., <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/children-jordan>

However, it is not easy for children in Jordan to find places to play in urban areas, and there are several reasons why children in the governorates of Jordan do not have access to adequate entertainment.

The first of these reasons is the lack of investment in public facilities such as parks and playgrounds in the governorates. In Amman, for example, there are 143 public parks, according to the Municipality of Amman⁵ but they are poorly maintained. On the other hand, the capital's population reached 453,650 individuals, according to the population census produced by the Department of Statistics in the last survey in 2020⁶. Per the Director of the Parks Department in the Municipality, Eng. Qassem Al-Rousan, in a report published in Al-Dustour newspaper⁷, there are 23 parks in Irbid, which serve 200,380 people in the region, according to the same survey in the same year. There are only 10 parks in Zarqa⁸, serving 154,510 people. As for the smaller and less densely populated governorates, these recreational facilities are not available in adequate numbers, noting that the degree of maintenance and quality of facilities also varies between different regions, which sometimes makes them unsafe for children to use. This is to be blamed on the local government that are entasked with their maintenance. In contrast, the work of municipalities and local administrations is based on paving streets and lighting, often forgetting the recreational facilities for the population in general and for children in particular.

Secondly, the economic factor deprives low-income families children of safe entertainment opportunities in the absence or lack of parks because private entertainment means are available, including children's clubs, private children's centers, and play areas in shopping malls. However, it requires financial capacity that may burden families in light of the difficult economic conditions. The consequences of this disparity deprive children of middle- or low-income families of accessing private recreational services. Therefore, the failure to provide public parks and free recreational spaces will exacerbate the deprivation of children and strip them of basic rights due to the financial conditions of their families.

Thirdly, the dearth of leisure options is reflected in the geographic disparities between regions within the governorates. In addition to the scarcity of available parks and their poor services in terms of basic sanitary facilities such as having water taps or clean toilets, the maintenance of the equipment in them varies, if available at all. This problem is also aggravated in the governorates, which means that children in the governorates are deprived of basic rights due to the lack of local government's concern for children's right to play and entertainment. Therefore, the central and local government, represented by the municipalities, must strengthen its role in this field with the potential support of civil society institutions and the private sector.

⁵Musa Al-Zyoud, "The Municipality Continues its Plan to Glamorize the City and Increase Green Spaces", Greater Amman Municipality, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3GLIOdg>

⁶Department of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook of Jordan, Issue 71, 2020. http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/databank/yearbook/YearBook_2020.pdf

⁷ Hazem Al-Sayaheen, "23 Public Parks in the Municipality of Irbid Begin to Receive Visitors," Al-Dustour Newspaper, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3XjJqwh>

⁸ Huda Abu Hashem, "Public arks: For the Whole Family or for Children Only?", 7iber, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3WapiM9>

Fourth, there is a general attitude among some adults that children should be seen and not heard. Consequently, it is noted that the voices of children and their participation in studies concerned with children's affairs are absent, and they are limited to addressing adults so that they, in turn, speak on behalf of children. This marginalizes the child's right to entertainment and focuses on other rights such as food, clothing, and education.

Fifth, cultural norms often dictate that girls stay home while boys are allowed to go outside and play. Jordanian society in urban areas tends to be conservative and restricts the movement of females, especially those under 18, to go to school, which may negatively affect girls' mental health. Along the same vein, there is inability of public schools to organize periodic extracurricular activities outside working hours in the school's facilities and under the supervision of female teachers. Implementing such activities would raise the participation of girls in particular in gatherings appropriate to their age, as parents see schools as a safe environment for gatherings and entertainment for girls. However, the lack of budget in schools precludes this option.

The price of neglect for children's right for recreation

The psychological factor is largely related to the physical activity of children. Parks and gardens improve children's health in many ways. Studies have also shown that being in nature can help calm and focus the mind,⁹ which is essential for children. For example, the average school day for a child is about five and a half hours. With that, a lot of time is spent indoors! It is no wonder that children with access to parks show increased focus, creativity, and general mental and physical health. Author of child's mental health book: *A Realistic Vision from the Psychiatric Clinic*¹⁰ recommends that families visit parks, clubs, and private children's gatherings to help children with psychological disorders. These activities contribute to draining excess energy, changing their way of thinking with exposure to plants and nature, and these visits can lead to an increase in their attention span and creativity.

On the other hand, in Jordan as in many countries worldwide, children spend less time outdoors and more time indoors. This is due in part to the increased use of technology and the perceived dangers of outdoor spaces. The term "entertainment" has come to be restricted to indoor activities within the confines of the home, such as watching television, playing video games, and navigating the Internet. This deprives children of opportunities to develop their skills in the largest sense. According to the mental health specialist, Dr. Alaa Al-Faroukh, the most important consequence of children being confined to homes and not enjoying entertainment in outdoor gatherings and gardens is making them more vulnerable to anxiety, tension, and irritability, in addition to anger outbursts¹¹.

Al-Faroukh adds that the lack of entertainment may lead to depression in children, a serious mental health condition that can have lasting effects on a person's life. Or, children without entertainment may become withdrawn and reclusive. They may have difficulty socializing and

⁹ Huynh, Lam Thi Mai, Alexandros Gasparatos, Jie Su, Rodolfo Dam Lam, Ezekiel I. Grant, and Kensuke Fukushi. 2022. "Linking the Nonmaterial Dimensions of Human-Nature Relations and Human Well-being through Cultural Ecosystem Services." *Science Advances* 8 (31): eabn8042-eabn8042. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abn8042>

¹⁰ Muhammad Al-Mahdi, *Child Mental Health: A Realistic Vision from the Psychiatric Clinic*, digital book, d. n . <https://bit.ly/3ih76m9>

¹¹ Telephone interview with Alaa Al-Faroukh, a mental health doctor, on November 29, 2022

making friends,¹² especially since parks and gardens provide social opportunities for children that help them develop essential social skills.

Also, children who do not enjoy entertainment become bored, which may lead them to attract attention in negative ways, such as by disrupting the class, getting into fights with other children, or resorting to video games, which reinforce their tendencies to violence and isolation. This is in addition to the fact that children not engaging in physical activities or spending time in outdoor spaces increase their chances of developing physical diseases, such as diabetes and obesity.

Practical solutions to ensure the right to entertainment is met

Responsibility for leisure and providing it as a basic right for the development of children cannot be limited to the parents or the family alone. This is because the availability of public recreational spaces is the state's responsibility as a primary guarantor of the rights of its citizens. Several other parties can cooperate in this, such as schools, the private sector, civil society institutions, and the media.

This paper proposes several solutions to ensure children's fair access to leisure and participation in activities in Jordan:

1. Allocating an annual budget for municipalities to establish and renovate parks and gardens for children within the scope of their services.
2. Encouraging schools to conduct more extracurricular activities for children within the school premises.
3. Including children in surveys and research that discuss their rights and demands in a manner suitable for their age.
4. Educating parents about the importance of providing entertainment for children of all ages and social roles and the risks of suppressing them.

Recommendations to reduce the gap between law and reality for children in Jordan

Indeed, the gap between law and reality in Jordan's governorates is massive. When the law is not implemented effectively, children are denied their rights and opportunities, and do not enjoy equal protection under that law. Therefore, local efforts must be intensified between various parties to bridge this gap. This paper recommends the following:

- Encouraging foreign and domestic investment in facilities that provide the right to entertainment for children, such as clubs and parks. These investments must be distributed fairly, with priority given to the less fortunate governorates in providing such facilities. International child protection organizations should also be encouraged to invest in such activities to ensure fair access for children to recreational areas.

¹² Muhammad Al-Mahdi, Child Mental Health: A Realistic Vision from the Psychiatric Clinic, digital book, n.d. <https://bit.ly/3ih76m9>

- Educating officials in municipalities and local administrations on the importance of allocating an annual budget for establishing clubs, gardens, and parks with open spaces inclusive for both genders and different age groups within the municipal boundaries, and maintaining them periodically. This is to secure a free safe space for children to play and learn. Besides, it is recommended to enable service providers in these spaces to deal with children per their rights.
- Directing research agencies and consultation centers to listen to children and involve them in child-related research and hear their opinions, which broadens the horizons of researchers and achieves results that are often in the interest of children. Also, reference can be made to the child's right to have their opinion heard in Article (7) of the amended Child Protection Law in 2022, as stated in a report by Al-Mamlaka TV13, which stipulates that the child has the right to "express their opinions, whether verbally, in writing, in print, or in art, or by any other means they choose, and the views of the child are considered according to his age and degree of maturity."
- Urging the Ministry of Education and the media to educate stakeholders, starting with children and parents, all the way to municipalities and local departments, about the importance of entertainment in public spaces for children. It is possible to begin by educating and encouraging children themselves to claim their right to leisure through school parliaments and activities. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education to teach students about their rights through holding workshops for counselors in schools so that they, in turn, provide sessions for students or publish visual or audio awareness materials among students that will educate them about their rights to obtain places designated for entertainment.

Moreover, media efforts and community platforms can be directed to educate parents and caregivers of children about the importance of the child's right to leisure in achieving a balance in their psychological, emotional, and physical development. To affirm the equality of both genders in entitlement to the right to entertainment, girls also deserve to enjoy the extracurricular activities, play, and other services offered in kid's clubs.

- Supporting schools financially to conduct extracurricular activities within the school facilities and under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. The latter allocates an annual budget for such activities, in addition to channeling foreign support from child protection organizations and civil society institutions to endorse such activities, as well as supporting teachers with the necessary training to hold extracurricular activities for children aimed at realizing their right to entertainment and preserving their dignity.

¹³ Al Mamlaka, "Al Mamlaka" Publishes the Full Text of the Child Rights Draft Law, previous reference.

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