

Jordan and Disability Rights: A Pioneering Leader in the Arab World

Kenneth R. Rutherford, PhD, MBA
Missouri State University

Abstract: This article investigates Jordan's rationale for assuming a leadership role on the disability rights issue in the Arab World. Tens of millions of people, including over ten percent of Arab families, are impacted and impoverished because of disability. To address this substantial challenge, the Jordan Royal family has leveraged Jordan's tradition of openness and generosity coupled with one of the best educational systems in the Arab World to promote disability issues. As a result, Jordan is recognized by the international community as leading the Arab World in promoting disability rights. Jordan's international and regional leadership on disability rights was recognized in 2005 when Jordan received the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award.

Key Words: disability rights, Jordan, Middle East

“Jordan's overall achievement in the field of disability provides a fine example of a human rights approach combined with leadership at the highest level. It draws inspiration from a rich variety of material – ranging from Arab-Islamic tradition to the modern Jordanian constitution and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.” *U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, remarks at the FDR International Disability Award Ceremony for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, United Nations, New York, N.Y., March 23, 2005.*

Despite Jordan's location in one of the most volatile and insecure parts of the world, it plays a leading international and regional role in alleviating suffering and protecting the rights of people with disabilities (PWD).¹ Jordan's leadership on disability rights was recognized in 2005 when it received the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award, named for the U.S. president who was a polio survivor and used a wheelchair for many years. On March 23, 2005, the award was presented at the U.N. headquarters ceremony to Jordan's King Abdullah II by the president's granddaughter, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, who commended Jordan for putting the disabled “in the forefront of its national agenda” and for providing inspiration by example in eliminating obstacles that “all too often prevent those with disabilities from joining the mainstream of civil society.” The award is presented annually to a nation that makes noteworthy progress toward the goal of the United Nations World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons: the full and equal participation of the world's 600 million people with disabilities in the life of their societies. Jordan is the sixth country and first Arab or Islamic state to receive the award.

At the FDR International Disability Award Ceremony, Michael R. Deland, chairman of the National Organization on Disabilities, remarked that one reason Jordan received the award was that, in 1993, it was the first country in the Arab World to pass legislation based on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was adopted by the United States in 1990. Jordan's disability law recognizes that people with disabilities need legal protections and social opportunities. While Jordan has already achieved disability legislation, Jordan's Prince Ra'ed, Chief Chamberlain at the Royal Hashemite Court, and President of the Higher Committee for

Managing Projects for People with Disabilities, said that “other Arab countries are just starting and it will be [a] long process” (personal communication, March 17, 2005).

Many of those who live in the Arab world, such as Jordan, have a hard life. Those who have lost limbs or faculties in those countries -- be it from war or other causes -- have the hardest life of all. People with disabilities must deal with trauma, physical pain, and with an environment in which there are often few to no laws protecting their rights and serving their medical or rehabilitative requirements. Their disabilities usually result in the loss of jobs, inability to go to school, and the impoverishment of their entire families. This is not just because of physical barriers. There are profound social barriers as well.

Most Arab governments have steadfastly refused to pass sweeping anti-discrimination disability laws, albeit in recent years, several Arab governments have made dramatic steps toward passing domestic disability rights laws. Jordan has continued to set the standard in the Arab World for disability rights. For example, it is currently improving existing vocational training programs to integrate PWD and other underemployed or marginalized groups by a) revising training curriculum and enhancing job-placement capabilities, b) raising awareness of structural and legal barriers that restrict the ability of people with disabilities to fully participate in society, and c) accessing economic opportunity by building a regional coalition of advocates and organizations that is working to expand opportunities for people with disabilities in the Arab World.

This article examines why Jordan became the first state in the Arab World to adopt disability legislation, which has provided a model in the Arab world.ⁱⁱ In addition, it considers why Jordan has become a regional and international leader on the disability rights issue, including the recently completed UN negotiations that resulted in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which opened for signature on March 30, 2007.ⁱⁱⁱ This article attempts to explain the genesis and development of Jordan’s work on disability rights. Such an investigation yields lessons for other regional states to apply in helping their disabled communities. An important substantive inference is how lessons learned from Jordan’s policy experience with disability issues can be applied in other Arab states. People with disabilities only present policy problems, as they put financial strain on their families and hinder societal development, if they are not incorporated into society.

The article’s broader significance for the study of comparative foreign policy is that it may help predict the success or failure of current United Nations efforts to address disability rights comparatively. If Jordan indeed provides a significant role model for the Arab region and international community, it becomes more relevant to examine the conditions under which Jordan was able to generate domestic and governmental support for disability rights. One of the implications is that under certain conditions, Arab governments can contribute to setting the international political agenda, especially in the development of domestic disability rights laws, which in turn effect state behavioral changes.

This article discusses three factors contributing to Jordan’s success in disability rights: an enlightened royal family, a national tradition of openness and generosity, and one of the best educational systems in the Middle East. Members of the royal family have leveraged their roles

to promote civic participation and remove barriers to equal opportunity, empowering people with disabilities through employment training, job opportunities, and rights awareness. As a result, Jordan is recognized by the international community as leading the Arab world in promoting disability rights.^{iv}

Factor One: Hashemite Royal Family

In the early 20th century, the Hashemite Family led the Arabs toward independence from outsiders, succeeded in building an Arab order, and laid the foundation for an Arab unity intended to guarantee rights, regulate duties and protect human dignity and sovereignty. During its reign, the family has continued to emphasize Jordan's Hashemite roots and, therefore, its support for Arab unity. The late King Hussein highlighted this view when he addressed the European Parliament in 1983, which explains Jordan's view of itself as being part of a greater national project:

“The country which I have had the honor to have served the greater part of my life, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, is a part of the greater Arab nation. The Arab and Hashemite struggle throughout history has been one and the same. I am a proud descendent of the prophet Mohammed, of the house of Hashemite, of the tribe of Qureish, the oldest and the most eminent family in Arabia. I am the great grandson of Hussein Bin Ali, the chosen leader of the great Arab Revolt often known as the great Arab revival, which started at the beginning of this century. I am the grandson of Abdullah, the founder of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Throughout my life I have felt, and continue to feel, humbled before the example of my forefathers for their total dedication and commitment to the honorable and just cause of peace. My country has committed itself to the defense of Arab freedom, security, stability and the right to progress in the entire Arab world.”

The royal family's tolerance and openness provided the conditions that allowed the disability issue to emerge and receive attention. There was a contract between state and society as it developed in the Transjordan. It was based on the monarchy, which allowed a modern constitution to develop.

The late King Hussein believed that Jordan's people were its greatest asset, and throughout his reign he encouraged people, including the less fortunate, the disabled and the orphaned, to achieve more for themselves and their country. According to Prince Mir'ed, a member of the royal family, King Hussein “always tried to make people feel part and parcel of the country and help each other. The idea of promoting disability rights fit into our family's philosophy” (personal communication, March 8, 2005). Asked why the royal family is so instrumental in social concerns, Prince Mir'ed replied:

“[W]e have [a] small family. Maybe 20-25 males. In Saudi Arabia, there are many princes. For us it is taboo for our family to go into business, but to serve. Not like in Saudi Arabia where there are so many royal family members – thousands – that many need to go into business. My family said you can't call yourself a prince and sit and enjoy the privileges without giving something back. Sense of service is important. Taboo

to go into business. My grandfather Zeid said *'ya tijara aw imara'* ('either business or being an emir/leadership.') My father brought us up with a sense of duty to help whoever you can. But it came very natural to us, it was not planned out. It's just something you have. All members of [the] family have sense of duty to the people. My immediate family is into disabilities. Other relatives deal with poverty eradication. The common factor is social connections with the people and not placing ourselves on a pedestal" (personal communication, March 8, 2005).

The relative peace promoted by Jordan's royal family greatly benefits Jordan's people with disabilities. Jordan is known for its security and stability, which, according to Eman S. Abu-Rous, Executive Director of Jordan's Al-Hussein Society for the Rehabilitation of the Physically Challenged, "Allows disability programs to flourish without interruption due to violence or political chaos" (personal communication, March 1, 2005). What does this mean? According to a prominent Jordan's children's advocate Rosemary Bdeir, "Peace is continuation. If war breaks out then it breaks everything and everything comes to a total stop" (personal communication, March 1, 2005).

Due to major instability in the region, in part due to the on-going Arab-Israeli conflict, King Abdullah II stated in a speech at Georgetown University on March 21, 2005 that many Arab countries, such as Jordan, find it challenging to "build solid reforms where violent shock waves are constantly churning." Jordan's royal family has therefore attempted to balance peace and development, sometimes at the criticism of the Arab street by appealing to its Arab Revolt roots ... namely that all Arabs are welcome in Jordan. For example, at Jordan's founding, King Abdullah I saw Jordan as a pan-Arab government, which is why he called his military the Arab Legion, *al-Jaysh al-'Arabi*, and it retains the name today. According to the former crown prince, Prince Hassan, "[I]n a sense Jordan is a melting-pot country. The bad news is we're a runt state. Some say we're [the] southern part of Syria or [the] center of Palestine or [the] north of Saudi Arabia" (personal communication, May 2, 2005). According to King Abdullah II, this view of Jordan as a homeland for all Arabs, helps propel Jordan's royal family to "set standards to develop the community and to be a model in the region" ("King in US", 2005). According to Prince Hassan, who as Crown Prince worked closely with his brother, the late King Hussein on the human development of Jordan, "We focused on policies, not politics, to benefit people. We focus on winning the peace" (personal communication, May 2, 2005).

On February 6, 2007, King Abdullah II announced a new strategy for the disabled. It is a very comprehensive and ambitious plan that will be funded by 65 million Jordanian dinars and under the direction of Prince Ra'ed.^v The King said he will personally oversee periodic meetings to receive implementation updates during the eight year plan, which is designed to reduce the rates of disability by 5% during the plan's first stage (2007-2009) and 15% during the second stage (2010-2015) by strengthening early detection and health awareness programs, and establishing more healthcare centers to service people with disabilities. In addition, King Abdullah said that one of the main goals of the National Strategy for People with Disabilities, which he announced on February 6, 2007, is to reduce the unemployment rate among people with disabilities from the current 40% to the national unemployment rate average for all Jordanians by 2015.

Factor Two: Education

Investing in Human Beings

Besides the royal family, Jordan's humanitarian leadership on disability rights has also benefited from Jordan's strong education system. Jordan's policy of "investing in human beings" in order to compete with neighboring countries that are larger and/or have more natural resources explains why Jordan is better able to address its disability needs than its neighbors. According to the World Bank, "[N]otwithstanding the difficulty of the regional political environment, and the lack of resources, the Jordanian population enjoys today one of the highest per-capita disposable income levels compared to other emerging countries in the region" (World Bank Group, 2005, p. 1).

In terms of disability rights and programs in the Arab region, Jordan has set the standard according to Suha Tabbal, special education trainer at the Amman-based Social Development Training Centre of the Queen Zein Al Sharaf Institute for Development:

"We think we are the strongest in the Arab world. I prefer not to compare Jordan to the Arab world. I prefer to go with international law. We can't compare to Arab world, I think we are better than them. If we compare ourselves to Arab laws, Jordan will never improve" (personal communication, March 3, 2005).

According to Sabri Rbeihat, Jordan's Minister of Political Development and Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, Jordan's focus on educating its citizens is all the more striking when compared to other Arab countries. For example, he says that "while Jordan has 2 percent of the world's Arab population, numbering around 5.5 million people, there are 23 universities in Jordan, accounting for about 16 percent of the universities in the Arab world. More than 94 percent of Jordan's high school graduates go on to university education, which is the highest percentage in the world" (personal communication, June 18, 2006). Because of its higher rate of education and inclusion of PWD in the educational system, Jordan has been able to better address the needs of PWD in its educational system than most of its neighbors.^{vi} For example, the National Strategy for People with Disabilities announced February 7, 2007 calls for increasing enrollment of children with disabilities from the current 57% to more than 80% by 2015 by redesigning school buildings, introducing Braille curricula, and bringing in other educational tools for students with disabilities. According to Prince Ra'ed, this strategy was based on input from service providers and families of children with disabilities. ("King Calls for Speedy Implementation", 2007).

Further emphasizing Jordan's high education level compared to other Arab countries, Jordanian births are attended by skilled health staff who are able to give necessary supervision, care and advice to women during pregnancy, labor, and the postpartum period, to conduct deliveries on their own, and to care for the newborn and the infant. According to the World Bank Group Database of Gender Statistics, 100% of births in Jordan in 2004 were attended by skilled health staff, more than 28% higher than the average for the Middle East and North Africa (World Bank Group Database of Gender Statistics, 2003).

Prince Ra'ed believes that one of the reasons for Jordan's policy of investing in human beings is Jordan's small size and limited natural and economic resources, resulting in the question: "What are leaders to do?" The answer, according to Prince Ra'ed, is that Jordan has made it a point to invest in human resources. Part of this legacy goes back to the days of the Arab Revolt of 1916, when positive seeds were left for "the development of man; his rights, his commitment to society which he works and as a country as a whole" (personal communication, April 17, 2005). Princess Basma Bint Talal, who is chairperson of the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development, concurs that investing in Jordan's citizens is critical to maintaining the royal family's view of development, which "is not only about providing people with facilities and opportunities, it is about learning from each other. Above all, it is about maintaining human dignity at all cost" (The Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development, 1999, p. 3).

Post-Secondary Education

At its founding Jordan did not have Arab-focused education. It did not have an American University, as did Egypt's Cairo or Lebanon's Beirut. Jordan also did not have a center of ancient learning such as Iraq's Baghdad or Syria's Damascus. The colonial experience under the Ottomans and the British laid the groundwork for an educated population. The Jordan region was more educated than the rest of Arabia because, before World War I, it had more contacts with Istanbul than most of the Arab world. The region's geographical proximity to Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in higher social, economic and political development, especially related to the rest of Arabia. Then, during the British trusteeship of Palestine, the British introduced a system of education in Jordan. Finally, according to Prince Ra'ed, "During the 1920s King Abdullah I determined that education and a focus on the individual was the key for his country's survival" (personal communication, April 17, 2005).

The University of Jordan was established in 1962, and several years later it started a Special Education Department, which was the first in the Arab world. By the 1980s, the University of Jordan became the leading regional specialist in the disability education field, helping Jordan to become the first Arab country to adopt the "partial inclusion of disabled students enrolled in resource classrooms," which included after school tutoring and speech therapy (World Bank Human Development Department, 2002, p. 18). The influx of Palestinians and other refugees also increased educational levels. For example, in 1991, more than 500,000 Palestinians, who were mostly educated, returned to Jordan from the Persian Gulf in light of King Hussein's support for Saddam Hussein. According to Evelyn Zakhary, Chief of the Social Services Division in the Department of Relief and Social Services at the Jordan headquarters of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), many of the Palestinian refugees were educated and "out of their exile, they developed comradeship in solidarity with their own group, which positively influence the educational nature of Jordan society." Sabri Rbeihat, Jordan's Minister of Political Development and Minister of Parliamentary Affairs also concurs that the Kuwaiti-expelled Palestinians were a "fuel for education because they helped start universities with Palestinian money" (personal communication, June 18, 2006).

Regional Focus

One of the major contributing factors to Jordan's support for disability rights is its advanced educational system designed for regional rather than local needs. Unlike many of its regional neighbors, Jordan has no known extensive oil reserve on which to rely. Rather, Jordan exports its educated populace to work and they remit money back to Jordan. One of Jordan's current policies is to strengthen the relationship between Jordan and the more than 1 million Jordanians abroad, which, in turn, will further propel Jordan's educational system. Their remittances play an important role in Jordan's economy and are typically underestimated. For example, Gulf States actively recruit Jordanians to work in the health field in their countries. In early March 2005, the Saudi Arabian Health Ministry visited Jordan to negotiate 500 contracts with Jordanian medics. Abdul Karim Sayegh, chairman of the Saudi committee and the lead negotiator on contracting with Jordanian doctors, nurses and technicians, said the move seeks to replace foreign labor in Saudi Arabia with Arabs, particularly from neighboring countries (Saudi Delegation Negotiating Contracts", 2005).

A few months later, in May 2005, Saudi Arabia gave "vocationally qualified Jordanians exclusive privileges in its labour market, equal to that of Saudi nationals" (VTC to Supply Saudi Arabia", 2005). Jordan and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement whereby Jordan would supply 1,000 trainers from the Vocational Training Center (VTC) for the next two years and help in establishing 50 vocational training centers. In addition, "Jordanian specialists will also design, implement and assess training curricula for Saudi Arabia, with VTC experts going there to oversee the implementation of these programmes... The VTC will train 50 Saudi vocational trainers every year in various technical and vocational training fields" ("Saudi Delegation Negotiating Contracts", 2005).

One of the most important disability rights problems in other Arab states is that the educated in the disability services field do not like direct contact with the disabled. For example, according to Suha Tabbal, Special Education Trainer at the Queen Zein Al Sharaf Institute for Development in Jordan, who has worked with the disabled in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, "Saudis don't like hands on work with the disabled, especially if they have a Bachelor's degree. Their idea of work is different. You train them, but then they don't want to work with the people" (personal communication, March 3, 2005). As a result, many Jordanians with special education training are recruited to help support disability projects in other Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, which usually do not have the local capacity to serve the requirements and rights of their disabled populations.

The high levels of education in Jordan have allowed Jordanians themselves to better serve its disabled community. They take foreign ideas and programs and then tailor them to Jordanian needs. Ali M. Alshawahin, Organizational Development Manager, Middle East and North Africa Region, Special Olympics believes that due to their higher education, Jordanians are better able to leverage their country's minimal resources to better serve the disabled. He says that "Jordanians don't have lots of dollars, but they do a lot with a little" (personal correspondence, February 18, 2005).

Alshawahin's views are confirmed by a 2005 World Bank's Jordan Country Brief, which characterizes Jordan's achievement in human development as "remarkable" and "at the top of comparable countries." The analysis notes that:

“These positive social results were based on ensuring a high level of gender parity in the access to basic public services. Jordan spends more than 25% of GDP on human development (education, health, pensions, social safety nets) and its outcomes are generally better than comparators worldwide at similar levels of GDP. Jordan’s achievements in human development are impressive. Life expectancy at birth has increased to 72 years and adult literacy rose sharply to 90 percent. Youth literacy rate is about 99 percent, compared with 88 percent for the region. The ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary enrollment is 100%. The number of children dying before age one fell by nearly 50% to 26 since 1975, and fertility rates are declining. The poverty rate was cut by a third from 21% in 1997 to 14% in 2003. Overall, Jordan has made excellent progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals” (World Bank Group, 2005, p. 1).

Factor Three: Openness to Foreigners

Multicultural Acceptance

The multicultural focused educational system and the participation of non-Trans-Jordanian Arabs in the founding of Jordan helps explain why Jordan is more open to foreigners and their ideas than many other Middle Eastern states. This multiculturalism contributes to the third factor that helps to explain Jordan’s prominent role in disability rights: hospitality and openness to outsiders. Because of its location at the intersection of the Middle East, Jordan continues as a very important transportation and commerce link among states in the region. More than most other Arab states, Jordan was integrated within a sundry of empires, including those ruled from Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, and Persia. Centuries later, Jordan was under the control of empires ruled from Istanbul and London. Most recently, Jordan’s population has increased and diversified by a series of immigration waves from the Arabian Peninsula, Palestinians fleeing the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraqis escaping the post-Saddam Hussein violence, and other minorities, such as the Circassians, Armenians and Druzes.

This foreign influence contributed to today’s tolerance for outsiders. Part of this was due to Western missionaries who, developing “an extensive network in Mount Lebanon, the Syrian coastal plain and the Palestinian highlands, came to view Transjordan as a particularly fertile field for their activities ... [who] had never encountered such a tolerant society”(Rogan, 1999, p.124). One explanation for religious toleration could also be that the Transjordanian villagers “distrusted Ottoman-run schools, fearing that once their children’s names were entered into the rolls they would be called up for military service. Consequently, Muslim and Christian parents alike preferred to send their children to missionary schools, where they received a multidisciplinary education that was widely admired” (Rogan, p.131).

Another influence contributing to Jordan’s openness to foreigners is the Arab Revolt (1916-1918), which included Arabs from across the Arab world. Jordan is a creation of the Arab Revolt and, according to Dr. Naim Ajlouni, Dean at the Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies, “We like to continue promoting the ideals of the Arab Revolt and take in Arabs from all Arab countries. Our doors are open. We cannot discriminate and do not want to. Palestinians

have citizenship in Jordan and we cannot discriminate against them. These are the ideals of the Arab Revolt” (personal communication, June 9, 2007). This openness is one of the reasons that Jordan has become a haven for hundreds of thousands of refugees, including more than 600,000 Iraqi refugees who arrived since the 2003 US invasion, who have contributed to the diversity and tolerance for foreign ideas and traditions.

Jordan’s tolerance of foreigners is evidenced in the number of Jordanians marrying foreigners and then allowing them to take the lead on social issues. For example, King Hussein was married to Egyptian, British, and American women, while the current king is married to a Palestinian of Jordanian origin. Even in old Hashemite days, the royal family had Circassian and Turkish wives. This acceptance promotes the idea of Jordan as a melting pot of people and their ideas.

The Influence of Foreign Wives

Many ideas about serving the cause of people with disabilities came from foreign wives. The prominent foreign women who took leadership roles in working with people with disabilities include Queen Noor, Princess Muna, Princess Sarvath, Princess Majda, Karen Asfour, Rosemary Bdeir, and Rebecca Salti.^{vii} Influenced by their foreign wives, the men of the royal family “got the ball going in a lot of different directions to help people with disabilities,” according to American Rebecca Salti, who married a Palestinian and has lived and worked in Jordan since 1972, including serving as Jordan Field Office Director for Save the Children from 1984-1994 (personal communication, June 15, 2005).

The women working on disability issues prefer the human rights approach to various extents. Utilizing the 1992 Jordan disability law, they are able to leverage attention to help change perceptions of PWD and secure funding to promote their charities. According to Mona Abdeljawad, Middle East Regional Coordinator for the Landmine Survivors Network, the foreign wives efforts on behalf of PWD is helping make positive changes in how Jordanian society behaves toward people with disabilities, including educating Jordanians that there is diversity within the PWD community (personal communication, February 12, 2007). For example, Princess Sarvath (from Pakistan) focuses on developing schools for people with developmental disabilities, Queen Muna (Great Britain) focuses on nursing, Princess Majda (Sweden) focuses on children with physical disabilities, and Queen Noor (United States) focuses on people disabled from land mines.

Princess Majda

Princess Majda’s work highlights how foreigners have made a positive difference in the lives of Jordan’s disabled population. After marrying Prince Ra’ed, she arrived in the 1960s from the welfare state of Sweden, where according to her son, Prince Mir’ed, “No one needs anything because there are cradle-to-grave benefits” (personal communication, March 8, 2005). While she arrived in Jordan in 1963, her work with PWD didn’t start in earnest until the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when she started working with Palestinians in refugee camps. According to one of her sons, “My mother comes from a privileged society in Sweden. She realized the difference and what should be done. If you don’t know the difference or how things should be it is like being born

blind from birth and you don't know what [it's like to see]" (personal communication, March 8, 2005).

Her humanitarian relief efforts eventually led to a cooperative and coordinating relationship with the Ministry of Social Development and the United Nations, both of whom were involved in providing relief to the displaced Palestinians. Based on her Swedish experience of social welfare, Princess Majda started promoting services to orphans and physically disabled children. One of Princess Majda's humanitarian projects was helping to start the government orphanage, and then collecting money with a small informal group of women, including many foreigners who had married Jordanians, to upgrade orphanages. One of the women, Rosemary Bdeir, who is from the United States, discusses the feelings of the foreign women trying to start the orphanage for disabled children:

"In the beginning we were just a small group of women. Most of us were transplants. By this I mean most of us had been born in another country other than Jordan. We had passed through the trauma of leaving our homeland and families. We had learned to live in a new country and a new culture. Our roots had taken, our children had started to grow up and we had time on our hands" (personal communication, March 3, 2005).

In 1971, the women opened the Al-Hussein Society, which was one of the first in the country to provide housing, education and physical therapy for the disabled. At that time, Amman had only one facility for children with disabilities, the Cheshire Home, and it was about to close. The women continued monitoring the government orphanage in Ashruf and supplying groups of volunteers. According to Rosemary, they also continued managing their own center, which was a rented house "in Jabal Amman near the Fifth Circle" neighborhood, where many of them lived. They got a government permit to open a 15-bed boarding home with a house mother and a physical therapist. There was a waiting list of 45 children (personal communication, March 3, 2005).

Subsequently, the women officially registered themselves as the Al-Hussein Society for Child Welfare. After successful registration and fundraising efforts, they realized that they needed a larger society. In 1973, an American woman, Karen Asfour, joined the group and became one of the society's more active volunteers for the next three decades. She currently serves on the center's board of directors and continually assists with advocacy and fundraising efforts. She credits Princess Majda with being the main impetus behind the society's success.

Karen believes that Jordan is different from other Arab states. As an American married to a Jordanian and living in Jordan for nearly five decades and one of the leading advocates for Jordan's children with physical disabilities, she thinks Jordan is an easier place than other Arab countries for a foreigner to make a positive difference: "Jordan is [a] multicultural mix, and the royal family reflects this diversity... If you have new ideas and [are] willing to implement, you can do it here" (personal communication, February 27, 2005).

Princess Majda's work with disabled children in the orphanages was a catalyst for her husband, Prince Ra'ed, to promote the rights of the disabled. Before her intervention, people hid their disabled children, but now there is more education and awareness of disabilities in Jordan

as a result of her and her husband's work. Prince Ra'ed later became known as the "Godfather of Disabilities" in Jordan. According to Prince Ra'ed, my wife "got me involved in the blind issue, where to date we've provided more than 250,000 corneas. We had an eye bank in what is now the West Bank but was then part of Jordan, and after the 1967 war we moved it to Amman"(personal communication, April 17, 2005).

Princess Majda explains why she got her husband involved:

"[T]he teachers at the school started up a blind association and asked me to head it. It was too much for me. So I asked my husband, Prince Ra'ed. He responded that 'I'm not a doctor; I don't know anything about the blind.' This was in mid-1970s, maybe late 1970s. He went to meet some blind [people] and he formed [the] Friendship Association for the Blind. We had an eye bank. He had heard that Sri Lanka had corneas so he signed an agreement and then went to Sri Lanka to get some corneas. There were times where we had corneas and eyes in the ice box. He then became head of the federation for the disabled" (personal communication, February 27, 2005).

Prince Mir'ed, son of Prince Ra'ed and Princess Majda, further explains the role his mother played in getting his father involved in disability issues:

"[When] my mother introduced disabilities to my father, he immediately realized it was a vast ocean of tremendous challenges because no one was doing anything about it on a national scale. He quickly realized that in his position he could have an impact on people's lives and that he could directly positively affect people's lives. My father always says that services for people with disabilities is not charity, it is their rights. A disabled person, he said, has a right to go to cinema, school, just like anyone else. Providing accessibility to Jordanians [is] for people with disabilities to pursue their dreams and aspirations" (personal communication, March 8, 2005).

Princess Sarvath

Prince Hassan, who served as Crown Prince from 1964-1999, was fresh from Oxford University having just finished an honors degree in Oriental Studies and Hebrew, when he undertook his first "hands on" involvement in public service. He personally supervised the creation of the Jordanian Palestinian refugee camps after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. This work marked the beginning of his lifelong quest to serve and advocate for the right of all to a life of dignity and peace.

The following year, in 1968, Prince Hassan married Sarvath Ikramullah, a Pakistani woman from a politically active family. Princess Sarvath remarks that:

"I arrived in Jordan, a bruised and battered country, in my early 20s and soon thereafter, sometime around 1968-1969, was asked to take over the Young Muslim Women's Association (YMWA). I agreed to lead the YMWA because I wanted to do something different than just what they were currently doing ... not just the usual sewing, typing. Looking around I recognized that although Princess Majda was working for people with

physical disabilities and a Swedish organization was working with the severely mentally disabled, there was nothing for the educable, mentally handicapped, either in Jordan or indeed in the region. I wanted to do something for these members of our community and decided to make this the focus of the YMWA.

Jordan was reeling from the aftermath of the war and a large influx of refugees, and had little money to spare for new projects. Therefore, if something was going to be done about a new initiative I needed to find the funding myself. The ladies of YMWA and I raised \$20,000 making and selling jams and jellies. I, myself, made soft toys and candles, and dozens and dozens of them. This \$20,000 was then personally matched by my husband, Prince Hassan. First, the YMWA hired three local women, all regular teachers, and sent them for further education in the U.S. and Norway. Upon their return in 1974, the organization rented an apartment and started a center, the YMWA for the Handicapped, with 20 moderately handicapped pupils” (personal communication, June 14, 2007).

Princess Sarvath went on to explain:

“When this effort began in the late 60’s, people were skeptical; not least those who believed that the effort and resources would be better spent educating children without disabilities. Standard practice in those days was to keep these children hidden from the public eye, and therefore, the work of the YMWA included introducing new ways of thinking and acting. This socially entrepreneurial way of operating the center which included mixed gender staff working side by side and co-educational classes was not supported by some and affected the YMWA’s funding efforts” (personal communication, June 14, 2007).

Yet, not to be deterred by funding challenges and resistance to new ways of thinking, Princess Sarvath kept encouraging innovative approaches to education. The center initiated multicultural instruction and vocational training, including developing more local and Arabic-sensitive materials for training teachers. A few years later, the Princess founded the Princess Sarvath Community College, also under the aegis of the YWMA, to prepare young women to enter the workforce. Princess Sarvath’s efforts to continue to bring education innovation to Jordan led her to found the Amman Baccalaureate School, which pioneered a new style of bilingual, multicultural and yet Arab education that proved to be a catalyst within Jordan and the region. Amman Baccalaureate also pioneered a community services program as part of its curriculum which included work with the handicapped and disabled.

Through her involvement with these two educational institutions, Princess Sarvath discovered there was no provision within the existing educational systems for children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia. A parent with a child with learning difficulties had no choice, but to either send a child out of the country to obtain an education or hire a personal tutor. These were options only for the wealthy. As a result, the YMWA pioneered a learning disabilities program to train specialist teachers. This program included sending Jordanians to Canada for specialized inputs, not only in regard to learning disabilities, but curriculum development. These trained professionals, who included educational physiologists, were then able to not only translate, but also to culturally adapt the battery of tests necessary for the correct

evaluation of these children's problems. Hitherto, the tests were designed to relate to a Western child's experiences. For example, Princess Sarvath wondered how many young Jordanians could answer the questions: "How much would a jar of peanut butter cost? Or, what a bowling alley was or a coin operated public telephone? These things did not exist in the Arab world twenty years ago" (personal communication, May 2, 2005).

In 1995, the YMWA opened the National Centre for Learning Difficulties, which today offers both diagnostic and remedial services to pupils throughout the country. In addition to the original 9 teachers who were trained in Canada, the Centre has graduated 800 remedial teachers who are working in both Jordan and the region. In addition, the Centre regularly organizes workshops in the subject in Oman, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt.

In addition, YMWA Center for the Handicapped continued to grow and expand its services and outreach. In 1981 the Center became YMWA Centre for Special Education when it moved to a new location. It was then that it undertook the creation of a vocational center, the first in Jordan, to combine training with production. In that first year of operation, it served 18 students. Today, the Bunayat Center has a student body of 175 students from preschool through to pre-vocational training, with a long waiting list. Several students also have some degree of physical disability as well. In addition to academic and vocational training, the pupils enjoy an extensive extracurricular program that helps integrate them within the community.

In addition to bussing students to and from school, and providing one hot meal daily, as well as four sets of clothes annually, the YMWA runs a program to assist the families of pupils who come from the poorest sectors of society. There is an early intervention program through which the Center's teachers reach out to very young children with disabilities, training mothers to enhance their children's development and give them needed support and guidance from birth.

In 1987, the YMWA established a Sheltered Workshop for young mentally challenged adults in the industrial area of Jordan. The International Labor Organization (ILO) commended this Workshop as a model for the region. To further promote the productive contribution of the disabled in society, the YWMA joined efforts with the government run Vocational Training Cooperation (VTC) in 2004. Now students of the VTC are trained alongside students with special needs, thus creating a platform for integration of special needs persons within the community. Nearly 1000 young people have benefited from YWMA vocational programs and many of them have gone on to find mainstream employment.

Princess Sarvath has learned from her family to never flag in the face of opposition to good causes. Asked why, she was so involved in promoting education for people with disabilities, she replied:

"My brother was disabled. He had Asperger's Syndrome, which is a form of autism. He died in 2004, at the age of 70, but was fortunate enough to have parents and a family that had the means and understanding to cope with his disability. Luckily, he was able to lead a full and productive life. As a result, we all realized very early on that a disabled person must be given the opportunity to live as part of a family and a community. Also, my family has always worked in education. My great grandfather founded one of the first

international style schools in India in the 1870's realizing even then that education would be to key to mutual understanding and respect amongst peoples. He also believed that men and women should have the right to an equal education. His daughter, my great aunt, was a graduate in the early 1900's and herself founded two girls' schools. My mother [Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah] was London University's first Asian woman to obtain a PhD. She was Pakistan's first woman member of Parliament in 1947, its Ambassador to Morocco [1964 to 1967], and participated in many U.N. sessions, including working with Eleanor Roosevelt in 1948 to draft the Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention Against" (personal communication, May 2, 2005).

Most recently, Princess Sarvath has been involved in raising awareness of the complications caused by Phenylketonuria (PKU), a rare inherited metabolic disease which can cause mental disabilities if the conditions are not identified early, and appropriate measures taken. As a result of her lobbying, the Guthrie test that identifies this condition is now done on all newborn babies in five of Jordan's twelve governorates to date and by the end of 2007 or early 2008 it is hoped that all newborns in the remaining seven governorates will be screened for this treatable illness (personal communication, June 14, 2007).^{viii}

Jordan's Humanitarian Leadership Legacy

In 1981, Prince Hassan as the Crown Prince of Jordan under the late King Hussein, addressed the United Nations proposing the establishment of the New International Humanitarian Order. He advocated the urgent need to bring the expertise and experience that is usually accorded with economic and security issues to humanitarian concerns. Prince Hassan expressed his strong belief that economic growth is only valuable if it is accompanied by adequate social development. Thus, on this international stage, Jordan publicly expressed its strong commitment to promoting humanitarian goals.

Therefore, becoming the first country in the Arab region to adopt disability legislation is in character with Jordan's past statements and behaviors on humanitarian issues.^{ix} For example, Jordan was the third country in the Middle East to sign the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and one of the first Arab governments to sign and ratify the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty. Jordan does not manufacture or export anti-personal landmines, and it is actively disarming thousands of mines placed on its western and northern borders. The treaty also includes legal requirements to support the economic and social integration of landmine survivors, many of whom are disabled, into society.

Another example of Jordan setting the region's standard on humanitarian issues is its behavior toward the International Criminal Court (ICC). If success is measured by the number of countries joining the ICC, countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are the most underrepresented. In October 1998, Jordan was the first Arab country to sign and ratify the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the ICC. Further highlighting Jordan's prominent leadership role not only in the Arab region world but also internationally, Prince Zeid Ben Ra'ed, former permanent representative of Jordan to the United Nations, was selected as the president of the Assembly of States Parties, the ICC's governing body, and Queen Raina was named as a board member of the Victims Trust Fund of the ICC.^x

Jordan has also received regional recognition for its human rights leadership. The Arab Permanent Committee for Human Rights commended Jordan's approval of the Arab Charter for Human Rights and requested that Arab countries follow Jordan's example and endorse the charter, which needs the signatures of seven Arab countries to be put into effect. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also commended Jordan's strides in the field of human rights, and for teaching human-rights principles in schools and universities (Jordan's Edorsement of Arab Charter", 2005).

Therefore, Jordan's work on disability rights is not an isolated example of its humanitarian leadership. On disability rights, Jordan has participated in all the meetings related to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and has been at the forefront of the 77 countries pushing "throughout the process and has fully supported the substantiation of the Convention" (Prince Ra'ed speech presented on the occasion of the 37th International Paralympic Symposium on Human Rights that took place on September 17, 2004, which was the first day of the Athens 2004 Paralympic Games). According to Mona Abdeljawad, who attended many of the UN disability rights negotiating sessions and coordinated many of the disability rights conferences in the Arab World through her work as the Middle East Regional Coordinator for the Landmine Survivors Network, "Jordan has participated in almost all the sessions headed by the general secretary of the Ministry of Social development" (personal communication, April 12, 2005). Jordan also included persons with disabilities -- Adnan Al Aboudi, Landmine Survivors Network (LSN), Jordan Office Director, and Alia Zureikat from the Higher Council of Family Affairs -- as part of their official delegations as experts. Jordan was one of the first Arab countries to include PWD on their official delegations. According to Prince Ra'ed, one of the reasons for integrating Jordan's UN delegation with PWD is the Jordan Government's "firm belief in the active participation of people with disabilities and their representative organizations in the drafting of this convention, and in its monitoring and implementation. There is no excuse for leaving people with disabilities outside the room as their treaty is being negotiated" (Prince Ra'ed speech).

This article examines how the Jordanian royal family's role in domestic politics helped to instigate government action to address the rights of the disabled, which eventually led to the first comprehensive Arab law to protect people with disabilities. In explaining this proposition, the article demonstrates how Jordan's royal family affected domestic legal rules on disabilities by changing the debate from a social to a national issue and educating its people about the unlimited potential to include people with disabilities in the Jordanian nation. This article's tentative conclusion suggests that the Jordanian disability case illustrates how Arab governments can initiate a norm and translate it into a powerful instrument with lasting influence by initiating the disabilityrights issue and then ensuring that it is placed on the national political agenda.

Kenneth R. Rutherford, Ph.D., MBA, is Associate Professor of Political Science at Missouri State University. In 1993, Dr. Rutherford lost both his legs to a landmine in Somalia. He has testified before Congress and published articles in numerous academic and policy journals, including *World Politics*, and co-edited two books: *Reframing the Agenda: The Impact of NGO and Middle Power Cooperation in International Security Policy* (Greenwood Press) and *Landmines and Human Security: The International Movement to Ban Landmines* (State

University of New York Press). He has worked for the Peace Corps (Mauritania), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Senegal), and International Rescue Committee (Kenya and Somalia) and is co-founder of the Landmine Survivors Network (LSN) (www.landminesurvivors.org). LSN played a leadership role in the Nobel Peace Prize-winning coalition that spearheaded the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, and chaired the US Campaign to Ban Landmines from 2000 to 2002. LSN also played a crucial leadership role in the treaty negotiations on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and contributed significantly to the text. In 2005, Dr. Rutherford served as a Fulbright Scholar in Jordan and was appointed to the faculty at the University of Jordan in Amman, where he researched Jordan's leadership role in human rights.

References

- Al Abed, M. (2005, May 20). VTC to supply Saudi Arabia with 1,000 trainers. *Jordan Times*, 30(8979), 3.
- Jordan's endorsement of Arab charter for human rights commended. (2005, February 11-12). *Jordan Times*, 30(8896), 2.
- Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development. (1999). *The Jordanian Hashemite Fund for human development: Where people build the future*.
- King in US: Jordan going ahead with reform. (2005, March 20). *Jordan Times*, 30(8927), 1.
- King calls for speedy implementation of National Strategy for People with Disabilities. (2007, February 8). *Jordan Times*.
- Rogan, E. (1999). *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Saudi delegation negotiating contracts with 500 Jordanian medics. (2005, March 6). *Jordan Times*, 30(8915), 3.
- World Bank Group. (2003). *GenderStats: Database of gender statistics*. Retrieved February 5, 2007, from <http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/>
- World Bank Group. (2005, September). *Jordan Country Brief*.
- World Bank Human Development Department. (2002, June 30). *Note on disability issues in the Middle East and North Africa*.

Endnotes

ⁱ According to the World Health Organization, the international rate of disabilities ranges from 7-10%, while the World Bank estimates that the rate of disabilities for the Middle East and North Africa is 4-5%, which indicates that based on Jordan's 2005 population there are at least 194,000 PWD in Jordan (Jordan National Strategy for People with Disabilities, announced by His Majesty King Abdullah, February 6, 2007). According to the World Bank's Human Development Department, Middle East and North Africa Region's June 30, 2002 "Note on Disability Issues in the Middle East and North Africa" report, the range of PWD in Jordan is 196,100 to 524,700 (Table 1, p. 4).

ⁱⁱ The impetus for this research project occurred while I was working with the international disability rights movement at conferences at U.N. Headquarters in New York and in the Arab region, I observed that Jordanian representatives were among the most active and assertive members of the international community in developing and promoting the rights of PWD.

ⁱⁱⁱ The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities opened for signature and ratification on March 30, 2007, at United Nations Headquarters. It was signed by a record 81 countries and the European Community and 44 signed the Convention's Optional Protocol, a mechanism to address individual violations and make country visits.

^{iv} While this article examines the role of the royal family, education and openness in the disability rights agenda setting process, which resulted in national and international attention that eventually changed its behavior regarding people with disabilities, it does not seek to evaluate the contents or effectiveness of Jordan's implementation of disability programs.

^v Based on the February 18, 2007 exchange rate of 1.48 US dollars to 1 Jordanian Dinar the total people with disabilities National Strategy for People with Disabilities announced by King Abdullah II February 6, 2007 is budgeted with 92,192,043 US Dollars.

^{vi} My own disability as a result of a land mine in Somalia, and the numerous American laws, most especially the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), assisted me in achieving my doctorate and a better understanding of what PWD students face around the world.

^{vii} Princess Muna was a wife of King Hussein and mother of Jordan's current King, Abdullah II.

^{viii} Out of 3,000 babies screened thus far, two were diagnosed with PKU.

^{ix} Egypt and Yemen also produced special laws regarding PWD during the 1990s.

^x In spring 2007, Prince Zeid Ben Ra'ed was appointed Jordan's Ambassador to the United States. He is the eldest son of Prince Ra'ed and Princess Majda, and older brother of Prince Mi'rad.