

Egypt Attorney General tackles spate of child marriages

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Abd Al-Maged Mahmoud

Egypt's Attorney General

The Egyptian prosecution is taking two officials to court, charging them with authorizing the marriage of 364 underage girls

Egypt's attorney general Abd Al-Maged Mahmoud is referring two officials to a criminal court on the grounds that they authorized hundreds of marriages to under-aged girls.

The officials are from the Zefta district in the governate of Al-Gharbiyya and are standing trial for marrying off 364 girls under the age of 18.

The two officials, A-Sayyid Hamdallah Al-Aswad and Qamar A-Zamman Abdallah Afan, were referred to the court by Attorney General Abd Al-Maged Mahmoud.

The referral was made possible after the Egyptian Minister for Family Affairs and Population Mushira Khattab was informed of child marriages authorized in the Zefta district, and passed the information to the general prosecution.

Nehad Abu Komsan, head of the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, said the practice of child marriages in Egypt was well known, but added that it was hard to gauge the exact numbers.

“There is no serious survey or investigation of this phenomenon, but there are certain areas that are famous for this,” Komsan told The Media Line.

“Bedouins in Sinai, for example, have their own tribal system and within this system early marriage is something they consider normal. Or Bedouins on the border with Libya - nobody visits these areas and no one knows what's going on there. According to their culture, it's best to marry early.”

Even in the capital Cairo, Komsan cited neighborhoods where locals marry off their daughters to Arab tourists during the

summer, in what constitutes a form of human trafficking.

Until a recent amendment in the child law, the earliest age of marriage in Egypt was limited to 16. The amendment changed this limitation to 18 for both boys and girls.

But the variety of ways in which a person can prove the age of their child has left an open door for violations of the law, Komsan said.

In the absence of a birth certificate, parents can have the age of their child validated through a dental examination.

“In this case, most parents were hiding the birth certificates of their daughters so they could base it on a dentist’s testimony,” she said.

This gave way to corruption and fabrications, sometimes with the cooperation of the dentist.

“You don’t necessarily have to pay the doctor to lie about the age,” Komsan said.
“Sometimes even the doctor shares the same culture and feels it’s his duty to support the marriage.”

The attorney general instructed an investigation of marriages conducted by the two detained officials and revealed that Al-Aswad had authorized 250 marriages and Affan 114 marriages, in which all the brides were under the age of 18.

Komsan said the case signals a more serious attempt by the government to fight the practice, even though she does not believe women’s rights are a government priority.

Marriage at puberty or shortly after is common practice in the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Asia, despite government efforts to curb this practice, according to UNICEF.

Many of these child marriages go unregistered, which makes their exact numbers difficult to gauge.

UNICEF believes that marriage under the age of 18 could threaten a child’s human rights, including a right to education, leisure, good health, freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination and has set a minimum age limit of 18 for marriage as the best way to ensure a child’s rights.

The court will convene this week to discuss the case of the two officials. The defendants could face up to five years in jail and a fine of up to 200,000 Egyptian pounds if found guilty

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