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Proposal to term 'special needs' people as 'disabled' sparks debate

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ABU DHABI - The recent government proposal to change the term 'individuals with special needs' to 'disabled' individuals has triggered a heated debate among the Federal National Council (FNC) members and evoked passionate reactions from parents of children with special needs in the country.

The cabinet decided to adopt the term disabled in keeping with international designations, but members of the FNC during a session in the capital last week argued that 'disabled' is a term that has negative connotations and would stand in the way of the country's efforts to integrate this segment into society.

"I don't think that many people would accept the term 'disabled'. In our country, if you call someone disabled, it is as if you are insulting them," said FNC member Khalifa bin Huwaidin.

In November 2006 the government passed UAE Disability Act (Federal Law No.29/2006) — the first of its kind in the country to protect the rights of people with special needs to equitable access to education, employment and a range of other benefits.

The law made the term individuals with special needs the official designation to refer to physically or mentally challenged individuals, as opposed to the term disabled.

Now, as the country is poised to join international disability treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Ministry of Social Affairs has decided that 'disabled' is a more specific term and more accepted internationally.

"The best term is the one that suits our country the best, and should not be based on external standards. Considering the reality of our society, the term 'disabled' is not appropriate. There have not been any studies or surveys that support that there is in fact a need to change this term. In addition, individuals with special needs themselves need to be involved in this discussion, as they also have a voice," said FNC member Dr Amal Al Qubaisi who was staunchly opposed to adopting the term.

FNC member Dr Fatima Al Mazroui, who was part of the committee that decided to accept the government proposal of adopting the term 'disabled', said the opponents of this proposal are looking at the matter from an emotional rather than a practical perspective.

"Both terms can be interpreted negatively, but the term 'disabled' is more specific. We decided that disabled is more appropriate because it is used internationally, and this should not change much as the term will only be used on paper. When you refer to people, you refer to them by their names and not by any of their characteristics," said Dr Fatima.

She explained that since the majority of FNC members were opposed to the term 'disabled', the health, labour, and social affairs committee in charge of studying the matter will conduct further research, and once again present its findings and conclusions to the FNC during the council's next term in November.

Safia Bari, Director of Special Needs Families Children Development Centre in Dubai, and the mother of a daughter with special needs, said she thinks the term children with special needs is a more appropriate and positive term, although she admitted that sometimes people have difficulty understanding what 'children with special needs' means.

"As a mother I wouldn't want to hear people tell me that I have a disabled child. That hits you hard. These children have many abilities and when you say 'disabled' you are only focusing on the disabilities," she said.

A total of 16 parents of special needs children surveyed by Khaleej Times all preferred 'children with special needs' over 'disabled'.

Ahsan Ghori, father of a child with special needs, said he feels that 'disabled' has a negative connotation and is demeaning.

"All of us are trying hard for special needs persons to join the mainstream and so we should do our best to avoid terms which label them negatively. They need support and encouragement. As a parent it does matter if others use terms that help them integrate rather than isolate the children," he said.