

**The Lebanese Association of SOS Children's Villages**



**“Children without Parental Care”  
Committee on the Rights of the Child  
Day of General Discussion  
Friday 16 September 2005**

**Contribution**  
*Prepared by: Zeina Allouche*  
**National Director**  
**The Lebanese Association of SOS Children's Villages**

**30/06/2005**

## I. Children Without Parental Care; Current Situation in Lebanon

### Lebanon Statistical Overview

- Total population: 4.005.000
- Families living under the poverty line: 32.1%
- Unemployment: 11.5%
- Illiteracy rate: 8%
- Child Labor: 8.3%

In its concluding observations on the second national report about the status of children in Lebanon, the International UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its deep concerns on the large number of children placed in institutions<sup>1</sup>; a significant majority of whom are placed there because of socio-economic problems affecting their families and without the use of judicial procedures.

This comment is very alarming given that a considerable number of children do have families and yet, are forced into institutions<sup>2</sup> in order to access basic services, as per their rights, such as food, shelter, health care and education.

Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. However, implementation of the convention is still far from becoming a reality. Basic services such as education and health care are still not accessible to the majority of children.

The extended family constitutes the traditional safety net in Lebanon for support and care of children. However, this informal support network has progressively been undermined by 30 years of civil war which has eroded social fabric and lead to the disintegration of extended family networks. As a result, there is an increase in the number of families headed by single women.

Many factors force single mothers to seek institutionalization of their children. These include: extreme poverty, limited job opportunities, weak or non-existent formal and informal support networks, and cultural norms. As a result, many single mothers place their children in institutional care with the hope of securing increased quality of life and better futures for their children.

Although poverty should not be considered as a direct cause for child abandonment, it is a major contributing factor for families, especially those headed by single mothers. The situation becomes even more threatening when poverty is combined with the lack of basic services and social protection policies, and the prevalence of certain cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> Concluding Observations, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, March 2002.

<sup>2</sup> "Institution" is a term used for all out-of-home care forms which are not family-based.

expectations; In Lebanon, widowed or divorced mothers are often expected to abandon their children in order to remarry. Children in these situations find themselves with limited access to essential services, are deprived of their right to education and must resort to working in very unsafe environments. They are at high risk of delinquency.

The number of orphans (mainly paternal orphans) in Lebanon is estimated at 40.000<sup>3</sup>. Among these children, many are forced to leave school in order to work and contribute additional income to their care takers and siblings.

Despite the limited availability of accurate government statistics on the number of children at risk of being abandoned, the Ministry of Social Affairs estimated that approximately 90.000 children are at risk of being abandoned<sup>4</sup>:

## **II. Reasons for Placement**

The Ministry of Social Affairs adopts the following as official criteria for placements:

- death of parents mainly the mother
- children from single and teenage mothers
- children removed by the state
- children victims of domestic abuse

Nevertheless and as previously mentioned, it is observed that many of the children have families yet they are placed into out-of-home care systems because of:

- severe poverty
- lack of accessibility to basic services such as health and education
- lack of alternative services (such as day care centers) that provide opportunities for single mothers to work while children are being taken care of outside the classical institutional system.

## **III. Out of Home Child Care in Lebanon**

In response to the increasing demand for out-of-home child care, several types of alternative services have emerged ranging from adoption, residential care, to institutional care.

The government of Lebanon has made no special reservation on article 20 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. At the national level, adoption is practiced but on a very low profile basis with limited supervision from the state. This practice has raised a number of concerns regarding child trafficking which are currently being addressed by the Lebanese government.

Taking into consideration the cultural diversity in Lebanon, foster care outside the extended kinship network does not match with the prevailing culture and thus not practiced.

---

<sup>3</sup> This estimation is generally used by the Ministry of Social Affairs and all stakeholders without being based on a specific reference.

<sup>4</sup>“The Best Interest of the Child in the Light of the Convention on the Rights of the Child”, a Conference organized by The Lebanese Union for Child Care & UNICEF, November 2003

Institutionalization, in its classical form where some 60 children share one dormitory, is still unfortunately considered as the “first resort” for out of home children.

Regrettably, such solution is often considered only to secure access to food, shelter and schooling.

The Ministry of Social Affairs maintains contracts with main out-of home child care providers. Its role however does not extend beyond providing financial support. It does not monitor children’s rights implementation within those services.

Given the lack of effective monitoring, several concerns have been raised by a number of organizations advocating for children’s rights in Lebanon including:

- admission criteria
- quality of care
- protection policies within services
- capacity of service providers, mainly child care takers

In 2004 and acknowledging the problematic of out-of-home care services in Lebanon, the Higher Council of Motherhood and Childhood in coordination with UNICEF and the Lebanese Union for Children have organized a national workshop to address the cause of children in need for alternative care. This exercise lead the Ministry of Social Affairs to launch a reform process with the perspective of establishing new contracts with out-of-home care services based on new terms of reference that address the concerns previously highlighted. The main outcome of this exercise was the rising interest of the Ministry in establishing and supporting prevention of child abandonment programmes.

#### **IV. Applied Strategies by the Lebanese Association of SOS Children’s Villages**

The Lebanese association has adopted two complementary strategies to respond to the challenges faced by orphans and children at risk of being abandoned in Lebanon. These strategies have been endorsed by the umbrella organization of all SOS Children’s Villages, SOS-Kinderdorf International, and include 1) the promotion of family-based child care and 2) preventive interventions focused on strengthening families in order to prevent child abandonment.

##### **1. Family- Based Child Care for Children in Need for Alternative Care**

Since its establishment in 1949, SOS Children’s Village has developed and put into practice a family child-care model with the objective of better answering the needs of children deprived from the care of their biological parents. This model has proved effective as it aims at building alternative families where the “mother“ plays an important and key role to protect and support children in their growth and development.

The organization is committed to working within the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As a result, SOS Children’s Villages have developed a set of 10 standards aiming at providing the best quality care for children who need alternative family care.

Hereunder main standards applied within SOS Children’s Villages;

### **A- Children's Admission within SOS Children's Villages**

Only those children whose needs are best met by an SOS family are considered for admission to an SOS Children's Village. The child admission process ensures a careful assessment of the case of each child to ensure that joining an SOS family is in his/her best interests.

Prior to admission, a thorough investigation is carried out by an SOS social worker to assess the situation of the child and to consider if an SOS family is the best care option for the child. A child admission committee, composed of senior SOS co-workers screens the applications according to clear admission criteria. It is to be noted that children's admissions are endorsed by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Poverty is never considered as reason for admission. Families, especially those headed by single mothers, are automatically referred to the prevention of child abandonment programme whereby children are supported within their own community until the mother or the other care takers reach their self-reliance.

A multidisciplinary educational team prepares the child for admission into the SOS Village and takes his/her consent when possible.

This practice is in high conformity with the Convention on the Rights of the Child that states in its ninth article: "A child shall not be separated from his/her parents against their will except when such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child" Article 9.

### **B- Individualized Quality Care within SOS Children's Villages**

#### **1) SOS Mothers as professional care takers**

SOS Mothers receive extensive and practical training over a two year period. The training is supplemented by ongoing refresher courses throughout their profession, enabling them to preserve the human aspect of their engagement while empowering them with new educational approaches to better answer the needs of children. Children's rights constitute a main component of their training.

**2) Each child is offered individual development opportunities** and given the support necessary to develop into a self-responsible and participating member of society. The SOS mother supports the child's physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual well being, taking his/her biological, social and cultural roots into consideration.

#### **3) SOS Mothers respect and listen to the views of children**

Children's views and opinions are considered, while appropriately challenging them to develop their individual skills and abilities. The children are provided with opportunities within their SOS families to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This is in conformity with the article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that states the right of the child to free expression and the participation in decision making in matters that affect his/her life.

### **C- The Child's Biological Family as partner in the care of the child.**

The SOS Children's Villages strive as much as possible and when this doesn't contradict with the best interest of the child, to maintain a regular contact with the child's biological family through involving them in the planning for the child's development. The biological family receives regular support and training with the objective of paving the road for the reintegration of the children within their families. When significant improvements are

achieved, an assessment is undertaken and the replacement of children within their families is considered as per their best interests.

During the first part of 2004, an evaluation exercise was undertaken in each SOS Children's Villages in Lebanon. Seven families were identified with a potential for improvement. Individual familial rehabilitation plans were formulated and implemented throughout 2004. Now 12 children were reintegrated within their biological families. This evaluation exercise is planned to be undertaken on annual basis noting that the situation of biological families are assessed on regular basis.

### **Success Story**

A child was born out of marriage, the mother was left alone and she couldn't manage her life with the baby, she was 16 years old and she had nothing to rely on...the newborn was admitted to our village, the contact with the mother was maintained. In coordination with SOS Social Center, the mother managed to establish her own small business and she was provided with special training on life skills. The mother is now 22 years old and her son is back to her after achieving her self-reliance

## **2. Prevention of Child Abandonment**

The SOS Social Centers in Lebanon aim at preventing child abandonment through strengthening economically and socially disadvantaged families, especially those headed by widowed or single mothers, to achieve independence, economic autonomy, social reintegration and self-reliance.

Through such intervention, the children are supported emotionally, socially and financially while still living at home with their own parents.

Such comprehensive support is provided at an essential condition that children are kept within their natural family context.

Since 1986, 84% of families assisted by SOS Children's Villages have achieved self-reliance thereby decreasing the likelihood of children being abandoned.

**Success Story**  
**Prevention of Child Abandonment**  
**SOS Social Center Ksarnaba- Lebanon**

**The M. Family includes four children (between 12 - 2 years old). The father is severely disabled and requires extensive care and medication. The mother is 45 years old, active and healthy, yet she was jobless and overburdened by the requirements of her family's daily needs. The three older children are attending a semi-private school and they are doing very well in their studies. However, the mother was unable to pay their accumulated education fees.**

The mother approached SOS Children's Village, seeking admission for her children. However, after the initial assessment, SOS concluded that these children would be best served by staying in their natural family environment. As a result, the family was given support through the SOS social centre programme. The director of the social centre discussed the situation with the mother, as well as with the social centre committee and a social contract was formulated with the mother accordingly. The following was agreed upon:

- The education fees would be covered by SOS for one year. The director of the social centre together with the mother managed to get important reductions on the school fees, and hence this was the first partnership formed with an existing educational facility in the Ksarnaba area.
- The mother was asked to prepare a feasibility study/business plan for an income generating activity that she was capable to implement, based on her skills and the availability of a market in the area.
- SOS would help with the start-up capital and investments for her business idea on a loan-basis.

The mother, who is very active, managed to draw up her feasibility study/business plan to establish a mini-bakery in a shop next to her house, within a period of only 15 days! As soon as she went into business, she generated income and started paying back to the SOS social centre. The family has already become totally self-reliant.

## **V. Recommendations**

As mentioned earlier, the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon is currently embarking on a reform exercise on the issue of children without parental care. Taking into consideration the prevailing local culture and norms, alternative family care (beyond adoption and fostering) is to be considered as a main solution that should be always complemented by child abandonment prevention programmes that focus on the family and the community.

In this context, SOS Children's Villages Lebanon suggests:

- ✓ To undertake a national situation analysis to assess the current status of children at risk of child abandonment and the various available services.
- ✓ To ensure that all stakeholders concerned in the causes of child abandonment participate. This includes obtaining the views of children and their families.
- ✓ To establish a national strategy to prevent child abandonment
- ✓ To establish a national youth policy aiming at addressing youth related problems that are causing breakdown of families.

- ✓ To establish national admission criteria for out-of-home care
- ✓ To assess the quality of care provided to children within out of home care services.
- ✓ To establish a set of standards that guarantees children's rights within out of home services
- ✓ To establish monitoring indicators, mechanisms and processes to protect the rights of children within out of home services.

Such reform at the level of alternative family care providers needs to be supported by an information, education and communication campaign aimed at the following:

- Advocating for children's rights will automatically decrease the risks of child abandonment.
- Promoting a better attitude towards single mothers will decrease child abandonment resulting from the social pressure.
- Advocating for a better coordination among various main governmental actors (Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Affairs) will ensure that the best interest of children is served.

**For more information:**

Zeina Allouche  
National Director  
The Lebanese Association of  
SOS Children's Villages  
P.O. Box: 55242  
Beirut-Lebanon  
website: <http://www.sos.org.lb>  
e.mail: [zeinaa@sos.org.lb](mailto:zeinaa@sos.org.lb)