

More than a shelter for children without families

Nasih Othman

Senior Information Assistant, Unicef Northern Iraq

Berivan is twelve years old. Her father was a taxi driver and earned enough to support his wife, five sons and two daughters. However ten years ago everything changed when her father was killed - "cowardly by some people who wanted something from him and he didn't accept" as Berivan says imaginatively. Their mother died a while later. She does not recall how she and her elder sister, Bekhal, 14, were brought together to the Girls' Juvenile House, or how their youngest brother, now 10, was taken to the boys' orphanage. They have grown up here.

The Girls' Juvenile House (or as it is more commonly known - the girls' orphanage) in Erbil, northern Iraq, was established in 1977. It is currently homes to 78 children. "They are from 3-18 years," says the director, "more than half of them are orphans from one or both parents and the rest are victims of family disintegration".

On an exceptional basis they also accept children whose families, according to the House's social researchers' evaluation, cannot afford to feed them.

"We are 12 in the sleeping hall. We are good friends. We don't quarrel much. Me and my sister are in the 8th grade," says Berivan. "They tell me I have a good voice. So I sang during the international children's day celebrations which was held in the House. All the girls had drawings shown in the exhibition also."

Her sister Bekhal is grateful to her teachers in the House who are so "nice and helpful". One of her brothers, who is now married, comes to see them sometimes. "When I grow up I like to become a doctor because I don't like being ill," she hopes.

Deeman, 11 and Dalia, 12 are victims of a "family breakup". It is 5 years since the family disintegrated and the 2 sisters found shelter in the House. Two brothers are in the boys' orphanage elsewhere and 3 elder sisters live with the grand mother. Deeman and her sister are happy here. "They give us beds, food, clothes, and every thing we need for school," she says. "There are many girls here, you see, we are all friends, we play together, go to school together, and my sister is here. But you know my other sisters are not here and my father does not come to see us, he cannot come. And my mother is abroad." Does she write to you? It is a naïve question but children have their ways of justifying their beliefs. "I have not received any letters, she is far away, she cannot write to me, but I often write to her, though I don't get answers."

Sazan, a self-confident charismatic character approached us while I tried to interview her younger sister, Khadija, possibly to make sure she responds properly. Khadija was a bit hesitant under her sister's watchful eye. "I am 11 years old, I am going to be in 5th grade next year" she says. "No she is only 10, I am 11, she always likes to show herself older" corrected Sazan.

This is the 6th year they have been in the home. Their mother died 8 years ago and the father as the girls say, has not remarried and lives with the grandmother. "No one comes to visit us except my father, who works in a bakery," said Khadija. "But we are happy here, so many friends and play and school." Khadija wants to become a teacher. Sazan on the other hand, who is the best badminton player in the House, wants to become an engineer. She is in the 6th grade and does well in mathematics as she says.

Lovely and shy Sheima is a clever child of 10 who is now in the third grade, and always top in her class. Four years ago her mother "went mad and was sent back to her father's home" as she says. The two children were later taken to the orphanage.

"No, he didn't, I don't know" she replied to a question about whether her father had remarried. The father is a welder and comes to see her every week. She likes playing and songs. She also likes picnics and the camping trips that are sometimes arranged by the House.

All of these children will tell you their own stories, unique but similar in principle; children deprived of the warmth and security of their own family environment. They are happy here, they tell you, but they know they lack something. For those children who can remember the calamity of family separation within the limits of their vivid memory, breaking with the past is a desperate effort. The bridge is there and they preserve it. They often cross to past - you can see this from their eyes gazing imaginatively into the distance when they are asked about those days - they might even sigh. They feel happy here because

they don't know any place where they can feel happier. Here seems to be the only place where such children can enjoy a normal life; their rights recognized and potentials developed as far as facilities and budgeting of the House permits.

Institutionalization is a solution though it is not the best one. "Not any application is accepted," says the director, "social researchers visit the family and study the case. Only if they are convinced that the child cannot be brought up properly or fed then the case is approved." Follow-up continues afterwards to pick up any possibility of family reunification.

Children of the Girl's Juvenile House of Erbil and other similar Houses in the North of Iraq have been one of the main targets for UNICEF's work for Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances. Renovation of the buildings, furnishings, equipment, the training of social workers and other services have all been provided by UNICEF, under both the regular and Oil For Food Programs. The latest renovation and refurbishment work, done in cooperation with the local authorities, has completely renewed the institution and, as the director says, improved service delivery and increased the accommodation capacity for up to 100 children.