

# Environmental and Economic Conditions of Arab Children: Health, social & educational needs (1)

It is a plain fact that children's conditions and needs in Arab countries are greatly affected by social and political conditions. Population increase at an annual rate of 3% impedes all efforts for economic development and implementation of public services. The high proportion of non-working groups (women, children, and old people), compared with that of providers or working force, added to the high rate of illiteracy which in 1970 reached 73% in some Arab countries, contributes to the lowering of the standard of living and thus to affect the living conditions of the child.

Other factors affecting the child's conditions:

## 1. Polygamy

Arab countries differ in their laws concerning marriage. In Tunisia, polygamy has been strictly forbidden. Other countries have submitted it to certain conditions like the financial capacity of the husband and the agreement of the first wife. It is a fact that the rate of polygamy is lower where the cultural level of husbands is higher.

## 2. Divorce

In many Arab countries, divorce remains the sole privilege of the husband, for example in Egypt and Sudan. Other countries, like Tunisia, Iraq and the Yemen People's Republic, restrict the husband's freedom by obliging him to refer it to the authorized courts which possess the exclusive right to decide.

Easy divorce leading to family disruption creates the problem of children's custody and its duration for boys and girls. Opinions and laws do not agree about this question but the general trend is to let the judge decide in compliance with the accompanying circumstances while giving priority to the interest of the child.

(1) Arab League General Secretariat, Cairo, Oct. 1978.

## 3. Health and Nutrition

The health and nutrition needs of the child begin in the prenatal period, during the first months of pregnancy. In developing countries, a small number of mothers, not exceeding 15% in rural areas, receive adequate hygienic and nutritional instruction. The lack of necessary services results in:

- a. A high death rate among babies and children
- b. Easy exposure to physical malformation and contagious diseases.

Families in general and especially in rural areas, lack the necessary information on child care & nutrition. Mothers keep nursing their babies until their first or second year, using no other additional food, and not knowing that this habit is harmful to both mother and child.

## Education

A general increase has been recorded in the number of children enrolled in elementary schools. In 1974-75 their number in Arab countries reached 15,535,000 as compared with 11,620,000 in 1970, thus realizing an annual increase of 6%. But out of every thousand enrolled students only 355 remain and complete the elementary stage.

The rapid rise in the number of students, especially in the elementary stages, creates the problem of securing an equivalent increase in the number of teachers. The problem is felt particularly in Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Algeria and Tunis where the number of students for every teacher ranges between 35 and 40 or more. This situation interferes with the general educational level. In addition, teachers in the elementary and intermediate classes limit their training to the elementary training colleges and rarely attain a university degree.

## New Egyptian Law Restricts Divorce and Polygamy

The "Egyptian People's Assembly" approved on June 3, 1979, a law amending individual rights to the effect that divorce and polygamy will be henceforth restricted.

A law concerning these questions was established half a century ago. All efforts to amend it were opposed by existing traditions.

The new law is expected to arouse definite reactions on the social level,

more particularly because divorce cases in Egypt are evaluated at 75000 per year, besides those of polygamy which so far have evaded all evaluation. From now on the husband will have to meet certain financial and legal conditions before he decides to divorce.

("An-Nahar" daily, Beirut July 5, 1979)