

DEVELOPMENT OF 3 TO 6 YEAR-OLD CHILDREN AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT⁽¹⁾

In 1975, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, in collaboration with UNICEF, undertook a study whose purpose was to develop a strategy for a national survey of the preschool child in Lebanon. Interrupted by the political events which ravaged the country, work was resumed in 1978 and finished in 1980. Besides providing a strategy for a national survey, the ultimate objective of the study was to supply indicators of childhood needs which would increase understanding and serve as a guide to planners and policy-makers.

In 150 pages, this pilot study analyzes the issue of the child's growth on three different but interrelated levels: the level of the child, the level of the family and the level of the human settlement: city, town, village. Information was classified in relation to the basic dimensions of childhood growth: the physical, the social, the emotional and the cognitive dimensions.

The sampling technique aimed first: to rank and classify all the settlements in Lebanon according to size; second, to classify the urban and the rural settlements according to specific features previously established.

The total number of urban settlements identified was 37, including Beirut, its suburbs and the main towns of the country. The number of rural settlements was 1628, divided into 5 zones on the basis of altitude, climate, type of land irrigation, type of produce and habitability. No attempt was made at drawing a random sample. Urban and rural settlements were selected purposely in order to include settlements from the different geographical locations and proportionately to their distribution in the different strata.

1) Survey of Rural Settlements

The 45 rural settlements selected for the survey revealed that differences existed between the different ecological zones with respect to community characteristics and factors affecting the development of young children. Community health and social services were unevenly distributed. Social centers were of the welfare type and medical services curative. Primary education was accessible to all villages but secondary education was limited to a few and vocational schools non-existent. Communication with the outside world was limited to radio and television. The two zones which appear to have fewer basic facilities were the Beqa'a and the Akkar areas.

2) Urban Settlements

Data on Beirut and other cities and towns were

lost during the events. Information was available only for the 14 suburbs studied which, as the conclusion says, have little to offer the children's total development: huge buildings of concrete blocks; dirty, busy streets; absence of trees and gardens, no curative health facilities, and absence of playgrounds. Political dissensions were reflected in the existence of 27 party centers with different political affiliations, disseminated in the studied suburbs.

The young child of Beirut's suburbs has to rely almost entirely on his family for his physical and mental development, since his environment does not provide him with any factors of growth except schools with varied levels and, on the whole, these are below the levels of schools in Beirut and other cities. Some children are more favored because of their middle or upper class status, where parents can choose better living conditions and place their children in schools with acceptable standards.

3) The Family

Data on the Lebanese family, unlike those on human settlements, include Beirut, the suburbs and nine cities and towns.

The main data obtained are:

- The nuclear family forms a majority in the studied sample: between 73% and 85%.
- The average number in the family is: 5.9 in Beirut and 6-6.9 in suburbs, towns and villages.
- The average number of living children per family is: 2.98 in Beirut and 4-4.97 in suburbs, towns and villages.
- The age distribution of parents indicates the higher age groups for fathers, with an average age of 45 for fathers and 37 for mothers.

The educational data show that illiterate mothers constitute the largest group among all levels. In small villages 24 % of fathers and 63 % of mothers are illiterate. In towns, illiterate fathers comprise 16% of the sample and mothers 56%.

The largest number of employed fathers, 76% in all settlements, work in the private sector. Judged by the father's education and employment, the largest proportion of lower class families exist in small villages and towns, 53% and 35% respectively; while the highest proportion of middle class families are in Beirut and suburbs, 61.3% respectively.

General findings reveal that small villages in rural districts were the least privileged in matters of housing conditions, children's schooling and access to mass media.

The majority of respondents reported preference for private schools, private medical care and national banks in their financial transactions.

Findings revealed that 25% of preschool children in Beirut were out of school, as compared to 38% in suburbs and towns and 43% in villages.

4) The Child

Concerning the role played by mothers in the cognitive and social development of their children,

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(1) Monographs of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, No. 3, 1980, Principal Investigators: Julinda Abu Nasr, Mary Makhoul, Irini Lorfing.