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CHILD CARE IN ALGERIA

Peter Righton*

IN April this year the author had the good fortune to visit Algeria as a member of a British party invited to attend and contribute to a seminar on the deprived child. The seminar was organised by the Algerian Red Crescent; War on Want and Save the Children Fund met the expenses of the visit, which lasted for five days, including one day spent in visits of observation. The notes that follow are inevitably sketchy and impressionistic, though it is hoped the facts are broadly accurate.

The development of child care provision in Algeria during the past decade must be viewed against the background of the devastating War of Liberation from France, which, when it came to an end in 1962, left the country with 300,000 war orphans in immediate need of the most basic means of survival. In the year preceding independence, over a million French people left Algeria, including virtually all the top level servants and local government officers who, for good measure, made a bonfire of most of the official records and documents before their departure. Administratively, the Algerians had to begin almost from scratch with minimal resources; as far as child care is concerned the progress made in ten years — despite serious current deficiencies which are freely admitted — is phenomenal.

NLF brand of marxism

The work of reconstruction has been carried out under the direction of the only political party in Algeria: the National Liberation Front, which professes a refreshingly pragmatic and undoctinaire brand of marxism. The various programmes — political, economic, social and educational — have been conducted, perhaps inevitably, as military-style operations in which the army itself has played a prominent though scarcely oppressive part. All young Algerian males do two years compulsory military service, of which the second year is wholly devoted to a wide variety of work in the (civilian) community, ranging from road-building to helping with pre school play groups. The enormous number of homeless and orphan children, most of them now in early or middle adolescence, are accommodated for the most part in large single-sex children's communities, those for boys (such as the Ho-Chi-Minh community just outside Algiers, which was visited by the British delegation), being often organised on paramilitary lines, each 'brigade' having its own quarters and style and colour of uniform. The *moniteurs* (child care staff) in these establishments are usually enthusiastic, untrained young men, who display a good deal of affectionate warmth to the children in their charge, and are the reverse of rigid and

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militaristic in their attitudes. Some, though not all, of the communities have an *educateur* as their head who has been trained in France; there is so far no training provision for residential care staff in Algeria itself.

Readers may well be critical of these arrangements. It should, however, be remembered that the only alternative for the children concerned is the streets of Algeria's cities — which are freer of beggars and destitute children than any other towns in North Africa. Moreover, neither the Algerian government nor the majority of the Algerian members of the April seminar, (who represented a wide range of the medical, social, and educational services of the country), are in the least satisfied with the situation — in particular with the high proportion of deprived children in institutions and with their segregation by sex.

Cultural problems

The problem faced by the advocates of change, however, is not only that of scarce resources. In 1962 the new government inherited an uneasy admixture of French administrative institutions, (which had made little provision for Algerian children, either socially or educationally), and Islamic cultural tradition, which included neither the practice of boarding out, (outside the extended family), nor that of adoption (specifically forbidden by Koranic law). Fostering, therefore, is barely in its infancy in Algeria — though a tentative start has been made — and adoption does not exist. Strong radical pressures — which were very evident at the seminar — may well bring a breakthrough before long in both legislation and practice; in the meantime, infants and young children deprived of parental care have two alternatives: placement with grandparents or other relatives, (a much more common outcome in Algeria than in Britain), or reception into

nurseries, which are few and staffed by unqualified workers. The nursery in Algiers visited by the British delegation was, it must be admitted, one of the most unsatisfactory that members had seen anywhere: a dismal example of under-stimulation and batch living, which was the more depressing when one realised that almost all the infants in it were destined for institutional life throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Health and educational services for children — especially the former — have developed much more rapidly, so far, than social services. Bearing in mind the fact that, in 1962, the French left Algeria almost totally bereft of doctors and teachers, it is a striking tribute to the country's energy and determination, first, that schooling is now available to all Algerian children up to 14 under qualified Algerian teachers, (albeit only for half of each day), secondly, that provision for the sick and handicapped child challenges comparison with that in many Western nations. Indeed the delegation visited one day centre in Algiers for mentally disordered children which would be a model of its kind anywhere in the world. Under the direction of a brilliant, far-sighted and warmly human psychiatrist, it is situated in close proximity to a primary school for normal children, who mingle and play in delightfully spontaneous and unselfconscious fashion with their handicapped peers at intervals throughout the day. Contact with parents is vigorously maintained by the psychiatrist and a small team of *assistantes sociales* in Algiers; social transport allocation, (won only after a hard-fought battle), enables children to be brought to the centre from a wide area round the city, thus saving both the financial and social costs of specialist residential provision.

Social work training

There is a school for the training of *assistantes sociales* in Algiers; social work educa-

tion is otherwise only obtainable outside the country, usually in France. The government, however, is pursuing a vigorous policy — within available resources — of setting up training for all the professions within its own borders, and there is a keen interest in developing training as soon as possible for residential workers.

The impression that came over most strongly during our visit was of a keenly intelligent and determined people who know where they want to go, have the drive and initiative to produce the resources they need to get them there, and who have preserved qualities of humanity and optimism that are not always readily apparent in more developed countries.

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