

A visit to Lahore: experiencing residential care in another culture

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Key words: Scottish Institute; residential child care; SOS Children's Village;

The SOS Children's Village in Lahore

Children in Pakistan face a variety of serious challenges ranging from malnutrition and poor access to education and health facilities to exploitation in the form of child labour (UNICEF, 2007). In particular, many children are at risk of being orphaned due to natural disasters or poor life expectancy. As such, residential care is a necessity in Pakistan. I was given the opportunity to visit to a residential setting in Pakistan run by SOS Children's Villages, an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) that has been active in the field of children's services since 1949 and provides services in over 130 countries. SOS Children's Villages focuses on family-based, long-term care of children who can no longer grow up with their biological families (SOS, 2007). In Pakistan, as in many developing countries, central government works in partnership with international NGOs to enable it to provide services such as residential care. There are seven SOS Children's Villages in Pakistan. The village in Lahore which I visited has been in existence since 1978. One hundred and forty children live in the village, which consists of 15 family houses or bungalows, a Community House, a Director's Residence, a Mosque and living quarters for the staff or 'co-workers'. In 1986, an SOS Youth Residence was established for older children which offers accommodation to 50 young people who are still attending school or college or doing vocational training. There is also a training workshop, and a dispensary was added in 1993.

The children from the SOS Children's Village attend the SOS Hermann Gmeiner School which was opened in 1991. This school also offers education to other local children outwith the Children's Village, providing a good model for integration. The integration of children from the SOS Children's Village with those from local communities appears to present no particular issues for the school. SOS Hermann Gmeiner Schools are to be found attached to most SOS Children's Villages, which highlights the importance of education in the overall vision of the NGO and the community. School, both primary and secondary, is a major part of life for all of the children and there is a real sense of pride that the children who live in the SOS Children's Village have a better opportunity to learn than that which is available to many other children in Pakistan.

Children come to the SOS Children's Village for a variety of reasons. They may be abandoned at the village due to pressures of poverty on their birth families. They may also be placed in the village following parental death or divorce. Some children may come from the children's hospital, following injuries or illness. Some of the children are street children who have been taken in by the authorities and placed in the village. Finally, they may be victims of natural disasters. I met two young brothers,

aged three and five years old, who were orphaned as a result of the much-publicised earthquake in Kashmir. Their future life will be at the village because there is nowhere else for them to go. The Director said that the boys were thriving and happy, as were all of the children in the village. Despite what the director said, however, I felt that the younger child might be suffering from trauma and was showing attachment needs. Given the backgrounds and situations of the other children in the village, I would not be surprised if the effects of disrupted attachment and trauma were present in many of them. Yet this was an area which appeared not to be well understood by the Director.

The structure of residential life

The children live in a number of bungalows and each bungalow has a ‘housemother’ who lives with the children. The housemother appears to provide the main leadership role within the bungalow. There are other women involved, who assist with different tasks but all are responsible to the housemother and eventually to the Village Director who is also the Director of Training. There are some men around the village but their tasks and their roles were unclear. They did not have a care role for the children and might have been involved in repair and labouring work required in the village. Where there is an extended family outwith the village, the family members are invited to visit and there is a visitor’s room. The Village Director also lives in the village and the children have direct access to her at all times.

The bungalows can accommodate up to twelve children. The bedrooms are mostly bunk beds or cots for young children; the housemother has a separate room. Most of the activity is in the living room where the children eat and play. Each bungalow has its own kitchen and it surprised me how the staff members managed to feed so many people so well from such a small area. The SOS Children’s Village in Lahore has very large grounds and the children are encouraged to play around the whole area. A central feature is a large cage where the children keep some animals and birds for which they provide care. There is also a village room where the children are encouraged to go to for added help with homework or as a play activity area for the young children. Babies who are received into care are not placed in a baby unit: they become part of a bungalow family.

The bungalow is not only the workplace of the housemother; it is also her actual home and in old age she is cared for in the house, as is the custom in Pakistan. This custom may change in the future with the development of homes for older adults in the country. Pakistan is an Islamic country and the children follow the Islamic customs in prayer and ‘call to worship’. Also, in line with Islamic custom, the girls stay in their bungalow until they are married, while the boys are encouraged to go into supported accommodation and are assisted to find work. Hence the youth residence provides services for boys only. All of the young people are encouraged to think of the village as their home. Apparently, it is not unusual for previous residents to return for an occasional weekend with their own children.

The Director said that, in line with the generosity expected of Islamic custom, the home exists on charity and sponsorship from individuals. In common with other agencies in Asia and Africa, sponsorship is received for some children. This sponsorship is usually in the form of cash donations which may be used for the general upkeep of

the village, or for specific projects. Former children of the SOS Children's Village are generous, and one well-known entertainer in the sub-continent has provided sponsorship to build a new bungalow, which is named after him.

Other services

As previously mentioned, SOS Children's Village has built a school for the children which also acts as a community school. It is reported to have very high standards. Older schoolchildren provide a volunteer service, and regularly volunteer for work in the Children's Village, normally during the summer. Other staff involved in the village include a psychologist and two nurses who are available 24 hours a day. During the visit I asked about foster care. The Director said that this was not a common practice in Pakistan. She also seemed somewhat sceptical about fostering as she believed that children received a higher quality of care in the family-style bungalows than they would in a foster family. While it is not common, fostering does exist in Pakistan and there is an Asian Network for the International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO). IFCO takes a strong stance against babies and children being looked after in residential child care, in common with most countries including Scotland.

Some reflections

The SOS Children's Village in Lahore was very different, both culturally and physically, from modern Scottish residential child care units. The system of bungalows appeared to provide a good quality of care and mirrored family life in Pakistan, just as our small children's units are supposed to do in Scotland. The issues facing the children were very different from children in Scotland in terms of the scale of poverty and bereavement. While there was not a deep understanding of developmental issues such as separation and trauma, the consistency of care provided by the housemother and staff who lived within the village was commendable. Such a high level of consistency would be impossible to achieve in Scottish residential care.

When one visits such facilities, one has consciously to put aside one's own cultural and physical expectations of residential care, in order to see the valuable work that is being done in developing countries. Countries such as Pakistan are aware of their place in the global child care community and are working actively to bring their standards into line with the expectations of organisations such as the United Nations. It is hoped, however, that some of the positive aspects of care, such as the value of education, are not lost in this process. As we know from research in Scotland, this is one feature of our residential child care system which needs much work.

The SOS Children's Village has a real pedagogical sense of purpose and I was impressed by the quality of care and the training programme offered. There is a real thirst for knowledge among staff and an optimism about what can be done for children in difficult circumstances. This was similar to what one finds in many parts of Scotland. There was a sense of purpose in the care of children, and there was a major challenge presented, insofar as care agencies such as the Children's Village are expected to fund themselves. While Scotland does have a thriving non-statutory residential sector, much of its funding still comes from government sources, albeit in an indirect manner. Hence the challenges to maintain services are much more acute in developing countries such as Pakistan. This was particularly the case in relation to long-term planning. Indeed, the absence of long-term strategic planning and the over-reliance on

project-based funding was reported as a weakness in the country's child care policy by the Office of the Commissioner on Human Rights (2007).

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