



# Street children in Egypt: from the home to the street to inappropriate corrective institutions

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**SUMMARY:** This paper draws on interviews with children on the street, in corrective institutions and in low-income households to describe the pressures that eject them from homes, and the abuse and exploitation they have suffered at the hands of the police, the corrective institutions and, often, their own families. It also describes the inappropriate laws and public attitudes that underlie such problems.

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*This paper represents the views of the author and not those of UNICEF. Although the author became aware of the problems of street children in her capacity as a UNICEF officer, this research was carried out independently, in her own time, while on leave without pay from UNICEF during 1995-96.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

THE PHENOMENON OF street children is relatively new to Egypt, and government and public recognition of the problem is only very recent. The term street children in itself has very negative connotations, especially as "the street" is correlated with crime, vagrancy and deviance. Until the end of the 1990s, no effort was made to differentiate between juvenile delinquents and the children who live and work on the streets or remain there during the day. According to Egyptian law, all of them fall under the law of "children at high risk" who are arrested when found and sent to custodial institutions for rehabilitation in order to re-admit them into society.

Owing to the efforts of national and international organizations such as Hope Village, Caritas, Oxfam and UNICEF, this negative attitude towards street children has started to change. The government of Egypt and the public at large has begun to see these children as victims of society and of broken families rather than as criminals and instigators of violence.

Originally, I came into contact with a large number of street children first through voluntary work with poor female heads of households in urban Cairo, secondly through professional work with disadvantaged children and, finally, through fieldwork in seven low-income urban areas during preparation for a PhD. In the first and last instances, contact with the children was indirect as I met them through their mothers, relatives or neighbours. My initial interest was in working with and studying poor women who had been left by their husbands and society to fend

for themselves, and this meant working with "...families at high risk of producing working and street children." What the work showed (and which has been confirmed by other research) was that poverty led families to break up and the break-up was often associated with domestic violence. Domestic violence and especially physical and sexual abuse of children were among the main reasons why a large number of children ran away from their homes and took to the streets.

Since this work is not based on a survey, it is important to note that the selection of cases described in this paper depended very much on my ability to convince the children to talk to me. The children interviewed fell into three categories: those met through their mothers or aunts and interviewed at their homes; those met in the streets of downtown Cairo; and those who were institutionalized, and interviewed at corrective institutions. As such, it provides some insight into the worlds of very disadvantaged children. It also shows the process by which family abuse often leads children to live on the streets, maybe fall into petty crime and, finally, end up in a corrective institution which then turns them into professional criminals.

There was little published work on which to draw when beginning this work, either on street children or on juvenile delinquents, but the paper does draw on an unpublished study of five corrective institutions carried out by an Egyptian expert and on the children who were there.<sup>(1)</sup> This is the first paper to publish interviews with children on the streets of Cairo.

This paper focuses on two separate but interrelated categories of what international organizations have labelled children in difficult circumstances: street children and juvenile delinquents. Both are deprived of most of their rights but the two should not be confused since a street child is not necessarily a juvenile delinquent. However, the case studies show how poverty, inappropriate laws and, finally, society itself force innocent street children towards crime. Most of the children interviewed have been caught in a vicious circle: he/she starts by being born into a poor or abusive family, drops out of school, goes onto the streets and finally ends up in a corrective institution. Instead of rehabilitation, the child, due to neglect that is underpinned by society's and policy makers' negative attitude towards him/her, is pushed towards one sort of delinquency or another. This paper seeks to show this through describing the life cycle of such children, drawn from the interviews, and through a description of the legal and social environment within which these children live.

But who are these children? The term "street child" is loosely applied throughout the world to children who live and/or work on the streets. It refers to homeless children who have little or no contact with their families and live on the streets. Many of these children survive by begging, theft, prostitution or some other marginal activity. It also refers to a much larger group of children who live with their families but work on the streets. Many of these children are engaged in occupations such as vending or petty services and many also attend school on a shift basis.<sup>(2)</sup> The term "street child" may also be used to refer to an

1. El Baz, Shahida (1996), *Children in Difficult Circumstances: Institutions and Inmates*, Unicef, Cairo.

2. UNICEF (1994), *Children in Difficult Circumstances*, strategy paper (unpublished), UNICEF, Cairo.

3. Roberts, Angle Raven (1991), "Notes from the field; strategies for street children of Addis Ababa; defining issues of street children", *Northeast Studies* Vol.13, No.2/3.
4. Azer, Adel (1993), *Situation Analysis of Disadvantaged Children in Egypt*, UNICEF, Cairo.
5. Hamed, Maissa (1992), *Protected and Creative Learning Through Earning; Evaluation of the Wissa Wassef Experience by its Working Children*, unpublished Masters thesis, American University in Cairo, May.
6. SPAAC (1993), *Street Children in Egypt*, UNICEF, Cairo.
7. See for instance Eweis, S. (1965), "Magnitude, tendencies and causes of juvenile delinquency in UAR in the period from 1958-1962", *NCR* Vol.8, No.2, July, pages 177-185; also Radwan, Z. and H. El Shennawy (1976), "Evaluation of the open-door system in the social care institutions for delinquent and vagrant children", *NCR* Vol.19, No.23, pages 319-332.
8. See Eweis, S. et al. (1968), "Assessment survey for services in juveniles institutions", *NCR* Vol.11, No.2, July, pages 211-240; also Hafez, N. (1985), "Juvenile delinquency and social change in developing societies", *NCR* Vol.28, No.3, November, pages 49-48. For more details see reference 1, chapter one.
9. See for instance Eweis, S. and H. Gomaa (1979), "Evaluation of juveniles institution programme of action", *NCR* Vol.22, No.23, November, pages 3-44.
10. See Abdul-Mutalib, S. and A. Galabi (1970), "Examining the delinquent personality", *NCR* Vol.13, No.3, pages 355-378; also reference 7, Radwan and El Shennawy (1976).

abandoned child who has to earn his/her living from the streets by begging, shoe-shining, selling cigarettes, car washing, etc., as well as living on the streets, i.e. sleeping in bus shelters, under bridges or in old sewage pipes. The term may also be used to include the children of single or very poor parents whose children are the only sources of income for the family, providing a livelihood by begging or even picking pockets on the streets.<sup>(3)</sup>

## II. THE CONTEXT

**IN EGYPT, MOST** street and working children are children who drop out of school. According to research carried out by UNICEF and its local counterparts in Egypt, the most important factor behind children dropping out of school is the deteriorating standard of education.<sup>(4)</sup> Several decades of rapid population growth have placed formidable demands on Egypt's education sector and simply keeping up with increases in the number of students has absorbed most of the resources, as a result of which the quality of schools has suffered. Moreover, while the number of facilities has expanded rapidly, funding for maintenance and operations has been cut, resulting in the rapid decay of schools and educational material.<sup>(5)</sup>

There is very little data on the number of street children in Egypt and on the severity of the problems they face. However, observing the large numbers of poor children in the streets of Cairo and other large cities of Egypt - begging, running errands, parking/cleaning cars - and how these numbers have changed suggests that the problem is on the increase. A preliminary study of street children in Cairo carried out in 1993,<sup>(6)</sup> added to the findings of studies from countries in Latin America and Asia where socio-economic changes similar to those in Egypt have taken place, suggests that the root causes are: rapid urbanization, deteriorating economic conditions, declining governmental and non-governmental social programmes, and weakening family ties.

The research to date on juveniles can be divided into several categories. The first includes studies on juvenile delinquency, its magnitude and patterns and the factors contributing to its emergence.<sup>(7)</sup> The second includes studies which seek to evaluate the performance of reform institutions and systems.<sup>(8)</sup> The third includes studies on the juveniles themselves.<sup>(9)</sup> However, most of the studies in this third category are concerned with the psychological profile of delinquent juveniles, processes of socialization and the role of the family in leading them into delinquency.<sup>(10)</sup> Very few studies in Egypt address how these children interact with each other, with their families and with officials in the corrective institutions once they have been identified as delinquents. In addition, there is no in-depth study of the children's lifecycles, no analysis of the reasons and the process which links dropping out of school with street children and, finally, to entry into corrective institutions. The fourth category of research includes critical studies of the legislation concern-

11. See reference 1.

ing the juveniles. In all the above studies, the research was carried out with a top-down approach. The children were seen as a disease needing to be eliminated through, in most cases, more laws and restrictions. Policy makers and experts were interviewed for their opinions, the child cases were documented but no one sought to listen to the children's own voices and no one asked their opinion of the suggested solutions. The only exception was research carried out by Shahida El Baz, for UNICEF Cairo, from 1993-1996. Five corrective institutions and the probation system were studied and case studies of several children, their families and their lives were carried out. The objective of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of policies affecting children in difficult circumstances, i.e. to evaluate if the Egyptian government's policies and programmes were successful in re-integrating these children into society, and to determine the suitability of these policies in dealing with their problems. A study of the children, their socio-economic backgrounds and the process that led them to end up in corrective institutions was the main focus of El Baz's study.<sup>(11)</sup> The children themselves were interviewed and their opinions and suggestions for better policies were solicited. It is the only comprehensive study which goes beyond describing the symptoms of the problems and which focuses on the root causes underlying them. However, much more is needed to change the attitude of policy makers and the community at large towards this category of disadvantaged children.

As noted earlier, this paper draws on my own experience based on work and personal interviews with street and institutionalized children but also on some of the findings by El Baz's work and on other documents prepared by and for UNICEF. However, this paper represents my personal opinions and points of view and not those of UNICEF.

### **III. GLIMPSES OF THE STREET CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES**

**STREET LIFE IS** very insecure and hazardous. Everywhere, street children are exploited and persecuted and, in some countries, killed by death squads. In many cases, street children in Egypt have been abused by their families or school teachers. Children living and working on the streets of Cairo are regularly rounded up by the police and held in crowded detention centres. Here, their heads are shaved and they are often beaten. Some are transferred to corrective establishments or other institutions where conditions are very poor.

Moreover, these custodial institutions do not discriminate between criminals and those who have lost their way and cannot find their parents or those who have run away from their families. The problem is that many of the children sent there had nowhere to go. Even those who were engaged in illegal activities should not be dealt with as criminals. Beggars or children who run errands, park cars or shine shoes are only victims of a tough economic environment. They deserve better attention than be-

ing sent to corrective schools which have the reputation for being little prisons. On the other hand, the government's already limited funding for these institutions has decreased and, with their growing number of clients, i.e. street children, costs are increasing but with no increase in resources. Furthermore, the staff of these institutions have been assigned jobs that they did not choose. With the exception of one NGO "Al-Amal Village" - which has a reception centre in one of the most crowded neighbourhoods of Cairo (Shoubra) which provides health and social care, training in manual skills, literacy classes and recreational activities to street children - street children do not seem to be on the priority list of NGOs in Egypt.<sup>(12)</sup>

For many children, families do not play the expected and appropriate protective role. Indeed, for many, they are the instruments of exploitation. A large number of families so overburden their children with work that they grow up knowing little else. Perhaps many families do not know when they are exploiting their own children by overburdening them or exposing them to danger, for the practice has become so common that it is accepted as normal, and sometimes welcomed. In the worst cases, families intentionally injure their own children, for example maiming them as this improves the opportunities from begging.

**MONA:** Mona, a 12-year old girl who walks the streets of downtown Cairo, has only one eye and was maimed by her father when she was five, for the sole purpose of going out with her mother to beg. She became independent of her father two years previously, having been arrested six times and beaten very hard both by the police and the women at the institution she was sent to. She concluded that she no longer fears her father and she doesn't have to go to him since no one can hurt her anymore. "I am now a grown up girl and I know how to take care of myself. After what my father did to me, I found out that the streets can be better and warmer places than one's home. The streets are also a better place than those horrible prisons they send us to. I have met new friends at the last institution and they have taught me new and more lucrative tricks. No, I will not tell you what I have learned, this is the secret of our business."<sup>(13)</sup>

**ADEL:** Adel, a 16-year old boy, was maimed by his uncle (his mother's brother). His mother regrets this incident for Adel was forced to lose both his legs when he was only six years old. She was a divorcee and thus a burden on her brother who kept her and treated her as "less than a maid in his household". She was forced to send her little girl to become a maid and to accept the maiming of her son. She said that she will never forgive herself for allowing her brother to do that to her children "...but poverty and being a single woman is the worst calamity." Despite his handicap, Adel has been arrested many times and detained in more than one institution since he was ten. He also explained how he was treated even worse than other kids "...as if it was I who maimed myself and not my uncle." Young men and children in the various institutions actually abused him as he was young and defenceless.<sup>(14)</sup> "I will not forget these experiences at

12. See reference 1.

13. From the author's interview with Mona.

14. In talking to Adel and his mother, it was his mother who talked about the sexual abuse of her son. Adel never mentioned it except that it was a nightmare and that he was beaten and humiliated by everybody.

the institutions. Beating the weakest is the rule by other boys and also by the supervisors. But they will not be able to beat me anymore. I have learned to use the razor quite effectively and I will defend myself."

There is growing evidence that children who live and work in the streets comprise a large group that is especially vulnerable to such abuse and exploitative situations. Many of these youngsters are engaged in economic activities either for others or for their own survival. Work that is detrimental to a young person's physical, mental, emotional or social development is "exploitative".

**ALY AND TALAAT:** I met Aly and Talaat in a juvenile delinquent institution in Alexandria; both were selling drugs when they were arrested. Aly claimed that he is better than Talaat because at least he pushes only hashish and not hard drugs. They are 13 and 14 years old respectively and had started pushing drugs when they were nine and ten. Talaat said that he was forced out of school because his father died and he had to take care of his mother and siblings. He had previously worked in a mechanics shop where the workshop owner had treated him well but had not paid him enough and he wanted to go to the movies and smoke like all his peers. He was introduced to an older boy who showed him an easy way to make money. He added that he himself was not into heavy narcotics only *Colla* (glue-sniffing) and sometimes hashish, and he assured me that the media were lying for such drugs were not dangerous at all. Aly, on the other hand, left school against his parents' wishes. He said that he was always being beaten by the teacher who was very mean to him because his parents could not afford to enrol him in the private tutoring classes the teacher gave. He showed me a scar that he said was caused by the teacher in his school. He met Talaat and started pushing drugs. They used to make around 100 pounds a week each and no one in their families questioned the source of the money.

All the children I spoke to were street children before they committed any kind of crime. The term street children denotes a place of congregation but also a certain set of working and living conditions. By the nature of their work and life, they are normally on their own, largely unprotected by adults. For that reason, above all others, they are vulnerable to many dangers and abuses, and they tend to receive few services essential to their protection and development. As shown in a 1994 study, relatively few attend school or receive health care.<sup>(15)</sup>

15. Badran, Ahmed (1995), *Health Care of Children in Difficult Circumstances*, UNICEF, Cairo.

**SAIED AND SHEHTA:** Saied and Shehta are two brothers (or cousins - they changed their minds during different interviews). They are very skinny and short. Shehta lost an eye in a fight and Saied had his neck and the lower part of his face burnt by his own father. Saied says his father burnt his mother as well and when she died he was imprisoned. Both look ten years old but they swore more than once that they were 16 and 17 years

old. They look anaemic and Saied coughs all the time; Shehta said that Saied sometimes coughs blood. They refuse to go to any doctor and they said that the doctors at Kasr El Eini (the largest public sector hospital in Egypt) treated them very badly and private doctors refused to see them. It is four years since they saw a doctor and they have been afraid to go again because they are poor and jobless and think that the doctors or the hospitals will hand them over to the police and accuse them of having AIDS. They know exactly what AIDS is and where it comes from. They refuse to admit that they are afraid that they may have AIDS but claim that it is only due to police prosecution of defenceless children like them that hospitals conspire against them and claim that they have AIDS. They had been arrested many times for vagrancy and pick-pocketing (they had lost count of the number of times) but they had never been sent to any permanent institution. They were always detained in the classification centres where, they claim, they were beaten before being released. The police had sometimes used them as informants against drug pushers and they said they liked to help so that they would be left alone to "sniff Colla" (sniff glue). They claimed that when they were sick or tired, they had no place to go to except the mosques but even that option was being closed to them by the "bearded monsters".<sup>(16)</sup>

16. Drawn from the author's interview with Saied and Shehta.

Street children easily fall prey to other young persons and adults, and are often robbed or have to pay "protection money". Many suffer personal violence. Perhaps even worse for their personal development, street children are in most places disparaged by the rest of society and consequently suffer from very low self-esteem despite their often considerable achievements in surviving.

**SHAFRA AND KARATE:** These were a young boy and a girl from el Zawya el Hamra who gave false names because they did not want to give their real names. They are brother and sister and they showed very aggressive behaviour towards all other children and anyone who approached them. They carry razor blades in their mouths and a Jackknife in their trousers. Both wear boys clothes and the girl (Karate) shaves her hair like her brother. Seven hamburgers, a number of ice creams and a very serious discussion about God and justice established a kind of friendship between them and an informant who worked as a buffer between me and them in 1993-94. They had been abused by their parents - but only admitted physical abuse. The police first arrested them when Shafra was nine and Karate was ten, and returned them to their parents. Both parents beat them very hard and caused them to run again, after which the parents refused to take them back when arrested. They were put into two different institutions and were able to escape again after receiving very bad treatment. They claimed that they never went to court but were put for seven months in detention centres which were also juvenile delinquent institutions with much older children, who also treated them badly.<sup>(17)</sup>

17. Interviewed by an informant who works very closely with street children.

18. Interviewed by an informant who works very closely with street children.

**TAMER:** Tamer, aged 13 when interviewed, had been beaten nearly every day by his uncle Hussein, his pick-pocketing and begging supervisor. Tamer was lost from his parents when he was five or six and uncle Hussein had taken care of him ever since. Tamer thinks his parents are "high class" and are thus ashamed to be seen begging. He had been arrested three times for vagrancy and begging but never for pick-pocketing which is his real profession. He was released because uncle Hussein is well connected with the detectives at the police station. For the same reason, Tamer is afraid to leave or run away because he knows that uncle Hussein will use his contacts to get him back. His worst times were always in the classification centres (or sometimes called the detention centres) where he told of how the other boys raped him. No one believed him and no one helped him.<sup>(18)</sup>

The above are excerpts from the life stories of children who, for one reason or another, left their homes. In many cases, they were ejected from their homes and went onto the streets. Their stories reveal some of the reasons behind their escape and also how miserable they are and how much they need help. The next section looks at what happens to those children who are institutionalized and includes a description of the custodial system in Egypt.

#### IV. INSTITUTIONALIZED CHILDREN

**HISTORICALLY, CARE FOR** orphans and street children was provided by religious institutions (churches and mosques) as part of their charity mandate. This care was based on two main principals: isolating the children from the society, and paternalistic methods of directing and raising them.

In the twentieth century, ministries of social affairs were created in most countries and these had the responsibility of providing care to street children and juvenile delinquents, supported by the governmental and non-governmental institutions that worked under them. Unfortunately, these new institutional arrangements did not introduce radical changes into the methods of care for institutionalized children. Methods for addressing the problems of children at risk and juvenile delinquents remained conventional and rigid. The main aim behind establishing such institutions and confining these children to them was to free society of the problem. This attitude reinforced their stigmatization and ignored the children's specific needs. The family environment was replaced with an artificial and, in most cases, unfriendly institutional environment.<sup>(19)</sup>

Studies on such systems were carried out. These showed that imprisonment and institutionalization neither cured anti-social behaviour nor prevented future problems. In fact, such measures usually reinforced negative behaviour because they exposed children to other models of delinquent behaviour. In addition, the stigmatization of having been institutionalized affects chil-

19. See the Action Project for Street Children, UNICEF; also Blanc, C.S. (editor) (1994), *Urban Children in Distress*, UNICEF.

dren's positions in their families and in society, and it has a very negative impact on their self-esteem.

Various innovative approaches have been tried to humanize existing services or to offer multi-component services as alternatives to institutionalization. For instance, some centres offer training programmes to governmental and NGO staff who work with juvenile offenders and established programmes to advocate for a more child friendly attitude targeting the policy makers and the officials responsible for such institutions. Other agencies and centres created or contracted residential communities or family youth homes to provide safe harbours for young offenders, away from the street gangs and the temptations of their urban neighbourhoods. In what is often a democratic context, children are made to feel like members of a family and are expected to contribute to the running of the household and are encouraged to be active participants in the community. Specialized advisory staff help the children to re-establish contacts with their families, and work to facilitate family and school re-integration.<sup>(20)</sup>

20. See reference 19.

Thus, increasing numbers of governmental and non-governmental institutions concerned and involved with the homeless and/or delinquent children around the world, are shifting to policies and programmes that provide care and protection to such children through open-door care centres, and outreach activities for the children and their families. These programmes also seek to study and treat the root causes of the problem.

### **a. In the Egyptian Context**

The prevailing public and official view of the homeless and delinquent children is "trouble-makers and/or criminals by nature" - rather than victims of circumstances. This is reflected in the fact that only the conventional methods are applied in the custodial and corrective institutions (which suffer from chronic deficiencies in funding, specialized staff and updated care programmes), and in the absence of preventive programmes that address the root causes of juvenile delinquency and/or its consequences.

In spite of the rhetoric on children's rights, the law still looks upon these children as criminals. Juvenile legal procedures were addressed originally within the penal codes of 1883, 1904, 1908 and 1937. Juveniles law number 31 of 1974 came to replace articles 64-73 of the penal code and articles 343-364 of the criminal procedures law as well as vagrancy law 124 of 1949. This indicates that the juveniles law was meant to reorganize crime and punishment for juveniles. However, the law did not include a definition of delinquency in particular; reference is made to juvenile offenders, who are defined as any male or female who has reached the age of 15 and is found guilty of any offence punishable by law. Although the law did distinguish between juvenile offenders and vagrants, who are subject to vagrancy law 124 of 1949, nonetheless both are treated in the same way. The law adopts the legal concept of delinquency which, by definition, condemns the juvenile as a failure. Although the

21. See reference 1.

law introduces protective measures for juveniles under the age of 15, it does not set a minimum age for legal responsibility. Thus, children under the age of seven can be subjected to court procedures.<sup>(21)</sup>

22. See reference 1.

Article 51 stipulates that if the provisions of the juvenile law are not applicable, provisions of the penal code and the criminal procedures code should apply. This is not compatible with the philosophy of social defence which considers that juveniles are victims of their circumstances. However, to challenge the use of juveniles by the organized fundamentalist gangs and terrorists, the new unified childhood law of 1996 increased the penalties on juveniles in general and on those between the ages of 16 and 18 in particular.<sup>(22)</sup>

### **b. Some Glimpses into the Lives of Institutionalized Children**

Despite the relative availability of quantitative data on institutionalized children in Egypt - since they are more defined (by residence) - very little is known about the living conditions inside the corrective institutions; the health, physical and psychological consequences of living in such conditions; and the root causes of the children's delinquencies.

There are 26 custodial institutions in Egypt. Some are open-door but most are semi-closed and closed-door. One closed-door institution, in El-Marg in Cairo, is for severely delinquent juveniles and is run by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Interior. It can accommodate up to 300 children (aged 15-21) who are sentenced by the court to confinement in the institution.

The official statement of those responsible for these institutions, whether open or closed-door, is that beating is prohibited. However, during research carried out at the Girls Social Care Institute in Agouza, interviews with the supervisors and the girls showed that beating was a common form of punishment especially for the troublemakers. If a girl is renowned for recurrent escaping and "mischievous conduct", she would be beaten in front of the others and, in some cases, her hair and eyebrows shaved for further humiliation.<sup>(23)</sup>

23. See reference 1.

**AFAF:** Afaf is 13 years old and had been committed for vagrancy. She has four sisters and brothers and lives in one room with a bathroom with her whole family. She left school at fifth primary and is known in her family and in the institution to be uncooperative, aggressive and a loner. She is anaemic and has asthma, and she herself identified her problems as she heard the doctor of the mosque tell her mother.

Afaf has been arrested only once by the police for vagrancy and was returned to her parents who claim that they can not control her at all. She beats her younger sisters and brothers and once broke her brother's arm. She said that she used to run away from home (to the relief of her parents) - but after she got arrested she was too terrified to repeat the incident.

Whenever she is reminded of the arrest she gets more violent

and then goes to a corner and stares. When questioned further she confessed that she was sent to a custodial institution for a very short period when her parents refused to receive her. In the institution, she was beaten by the older girls but also by one supervisor who did not like her at all and who used to insult and beat her in public for any minor mistake. She also humiliated her once by forcing her to take off her clothes in front of the other girls and made an older girl beat her up. It is true that this supervisor was punished by her superiors when they found out but the scar inside Afaf has never healed. She tells of how she was "...beaten by the supervisor many times and once she made me take off my clothes, all of it, it was a nightmare and she made Fawzia an older girl beat me. They all made fun of me and no one respected me after that. I will never forget this and I do not want ever to be go back there. If I am sent there again I will burn myself."

**KHALED:** Khaled is 15 or 16 years old and was committed for accidentally killing a friend. I met him at the juvenile delinquency institution in Alexandria. He looked very clean and was friendly and smiling; he also looked older than his age. Khaled left school when he was 11 because his family could not afford the school fees for him or his brothers and sisters nor could they afford the private tutoring. He worked as a *Naqash*, i.e. a wall painter, and was making a lot of money. "Money changed my life and made me respectable and popular among my family members and also my peers in our neighbourhood." He became the most important young man in the café and no one challenged his authority. However, one night in the café, he and his dear friend had a fight over a card game which turned nasty and he killed his friend by mistake. He was sentenced to five years and this was his third year. When I asked him if he had any regrets and how he felt about it, he said he was very sad for a whole year but now he recognizes that he is the one who is alive and he should put the past behind him.

He added that life in the institution was very tough, especially among the boys themselves and some of the teachers or the instructors. There was no entertainment and escape would be very easy if he wanted to. Some teachers beat the younger boys but they are afraid of him because he is big and has a temper and also because he gives a lot of presents to everyone. However, all the younger boys were beaten by the supervisors for the smallest mistake. Khaled also explained that some supervisors used the older boys to beat the younger ones.

**ALIA:** Alia is a 13-year old girl who was arrested for theft and sent to a corrective institution. She had been caught stealing from one of the clients of the hairdresser where she was working. Unfortunately, this woman was the wife of a policeman. "Very bad luck, I used to steal from the purses of the clients in every hairdresser's shop I have worked in for the last five years. I worked in many shops and used to leave after two or three months. It is my mistake that I stayed for more than five months in this last shop because it was very big and the owner was very

24. From the author's interview with Alia, at her house.

kind to me. Unlike the other owners he never beat me which is why I never stole from him himself. When I was caught, the owner tried to help me but the woman was very mean and insisted that I should be sent to the police who sent me to the corrective institution. Mrs Shadia there was very kind and she was very popular, all the girls loved her we all felt she really cared and loved us. However, Mrs Enayat was so mean and on Mrs Shadia's day off, she used to beat the girls she didn't like and I was one of them. One day, some money was missing from the kitchen and Mrs. Enayat accused me and she shaved my hair. I will never forget that day and will never forgive her for it."<sup>(24)</sup>

Not all the children who are put in these institutions were caught committing a crime or even caught begging or lost in the streets. Many of the children that I met inside these institutions had been sent there by their family to get rid of an extra mouth to feed or to appease a stepmother or a stepfather.

**HOWAYDA:** Howayda is 15 years old and she has been in the corrective institution for three years. She has not committed any crime and she was not arrested. She was brought to the institution by her father who claimed that he and his wife could no longer control her. Howayda, he stated, dropped out of school because she did not want to study any more and used to run away for nights and weeks, then return to their home without telling him or his wife where she had spent her nights. He decided to send her to a corrective institution because she "has become loose" as he stated in the official records.

"He brought me here and never visited me since then and I do not want to see him again. My real mother died when I was six years old and he remarried this new woman only six months later. I believe my mother killed herself by burning herself because she felt he will leave her for this other woman. My step mother is very mean and she is a bad person but he loves her more than us. She also gave him three boys and my mother gave him girls only. She forced me to leave the school in order to work as her servant at home. She used to beat me for the smallest reason. So I decided to run away and I met real good friends on the streets, they were the kindest people I have met and the only ones that really loved me. I was arrested and sent back to my father who decided to get rid of me forever. Life in the streets is not as bad as people say. It is much safer and better than my own home. Most of my friends in the streets end up in institutions like this one, there are two of my street mates here with me and we run away whenever we get bored and come back before we are arrested. Life like this is fun and I do not want to return to my father ever."

The cycle for many street children begins with an abusive home, which pushes them onto the streets, which leads to an arrest and finally to a corrective institution. From the few interviews carried out with institutionalized children, it became clear

that they learn many more skills during their stay in these institutions and they graduate as professional criminals.

**FARID:** Farid is 17 years old and was arrested for robbery. "I am here because I robbed the shop of my uncle. He sells used electronic appliances and my gang planned to get a couple of TVs and stereos and sell them. We wanted to have fun and we needed the money. This is the third time I got arrested and this time I am sentenced to five years. The first time I was arrested we were caught begging in the streets and they sent us to the detention centre where I met all the members of this gang. They released me after five weeks in the detention centre but my uncle and his wife refused to take me in. They said I always cause problems and never stay in one job. I left school after I finished my primary education because I wanted to be an independent man and take care of my sisters. My father disappeared many years ago and my mother died three years ago. My uncle, who is my mother's brother, took us in to live with him and his family. He turned my sisters into maids and wanted to marry them off early to get rid of them. So I wanted to work and make money but the workshop owners were very mean to me and I could not tolerate all the hours and the scolding so I ran away. I found out that begging was much more lucrative than any work and one is one's own boss. Then I got arrested and begging became more difficult so my new friends introduced me to a new job. We used to break into cars through the rear windows and steal the cassette player and anything else that we found in the car. We were arrested when my uncle told the police after I wanted to sell him a car stereo but he refused and told the police. That is why my friends and I, after we finished one year at the corrective institution, decided to rob his shop and we sold all the equipment we got from him. But we got arrested and now we are sentenced to five years. I have met pickpockets, thieves and even murderers here and they are much better than anyone I have known outside this place."

## V. CONCLUSIONS

**MY REVIEW OF** the situation of juvenile delinquents and street children based on recent studies or earlier work, personal contact with children within UNICEF and Egyptian government projects, and personal contact with children in the street suggests that there are very serious issues to be considered. These are outlined below, along with some recommendations.

First, with regard to the issue of child abuse by the family and society at large, the conflict between rights and customs, and the denial of the sexual abuse syndrome.

**Physical Abuse:** It has become evident from working with the juveniles or street children that child abuse has become accepted behaviour. A large number of the children fled from their homes because their real or step parents had beaten or even burnt them severely. Although, on paper, there are laws that

protect children from the physical abuse of parents, these laws are not respected by any of the parties concerned.

The attitude of parents who abuse was illustrated by a social worker who tells of when they talked to the father of an abused boy "... and asked him why did he burn his child, the father became very aggressive and threatened to beat us up if we do not leave his house; he shouted this is my son and this is the way I will bring him up...as I was brought up." A policeman commented that "...these kids are devils and there is no way to reach them except through beating them. I can not go to a father and punish him for wanting his son or daughter to obey him....my father used to beat me and I never complained and look at me I am now a police officer."

**Sexual Abuse:** Sexual abuse is another matter about which it is very difficult to obtain information; no one finds out about it except after the child has been raped and killed. Sexual abuse takes place in the detention centres and the institutions by the older and more powerful children. However, in many of the cases that street and social workers deal with, the father or uncle were the first people to sexually abuse the children. These crimes are probably on the increase but children have no place to go to complain and there are no clear procedures to defend these children against either physical or sexual abuse, whether by their families or others.

It is also important to consider the role of the classification and detention centres. Many of the children were confused about the difference between classification and detention centres. The former are supposed to classify and separate the different types of crimes in order to protect the innocent from the not so innocent. However, the lack of funds and facilities led, in many cases, to both centres becoming similar, thus leaving a vagrant, a lost child and a drug pusher - of different ages - together in the same tiny unlit room, sometimes for months, which can result in great physical and psychological damage to the younger and new entrant to the street world.

There is also the lack of appropriate skills and relevant training and the psychological make up of those who deal directly with disadvantaged children and who are supposed to help them. This includes the detectives, policemen and women, social workers and the supervisors at the detention and custodial institutions. The street child at risk and the juvenile delinquent are special children who are the result of a complex environment. All parties dealing with them should be trained in certain skills and should have a certain psychological make up that will allow them to help these children and not push them away from society. However, the scarce training programmes available are obsolete and irrelevant to the growing social and psychological needs of these children. There must be specially trained policemen and women - perhaps with different names and uniforms - who will deal with such children once they are arrested, and the arresting detectives themselves should be trained to provide a more human treatment of them.

Finally, it is important for the children, the families and the public at large to know what the rights of these children are and who defends them. This is another issue that is not clear either to the children themselves and their families or, in many instances, to the police officers who deal with them. Are there regulations that should be followed when arresting these children? Should there be a better system for detaining them instead of mixing all kinds of accused together from vagrants to robbers until they go to court? Are there lawyers who should be assigned to these children and are such lawyers simply government employees who share the same opinion as the rest of society, namely that these children should be detained and isolated and not rehabilitated? There is a need for specialized NGOs who can hire dedicated lawyers to look into such matters.

Various actions could improve the situation:

#### **Programmes and Action:**

- The street, the children's main habitat, should be the programme's main setting, thus limiting the institutionalization aspect.
- Activities should be built around the child and her/his needs, and not on the negative and traditional perspective of an adult. Street facilitators should build rapport and mutual trust with the children within their habitat. They must maintain a respectful attitude toward the needs expressed by each child so that each child can participate in defining the programme's actions. This can be achieved through involving the children in recreational activities with the facilitator, and good communication means.
- Care provision should not alienate the child from its environment, i.e. services should be offered to children near the areas where they live.
- The capacities and capabilities of NGOs dealing with this category of children should be increased and upgraded to ensure that they can carry out services that provide street children with:
  - medical services (regular medical check-ups and follow-up);
  - meals that meet at least 60 per cent of their daily nutritional requirements;
  - educational services: literacy classes and/or tutoring, and the purchase of school supplies for children who are enrolled in schools;
  - vocational training to be able to find more stable work.

#### **Policy and Research:**

- Undertake a descriptive and analytical study of the problem of street children that should include:
  - defining their numbers, locations, patterns of working and living on the streets and the hardships and dangers they encounter;
  - key actors and underlying causes;

This study should identify points of intervention to help the children before they join their street mates or before they are arrested and turned into criminals.

- Advocacy aimed at policy makers and public opinion through all forms of media to alert the community and the policy makers to the different types of abuses that these children face.
- Research on the legal rights of juvenile delinquents, with an advocacy and training component, where all the parties - including the children and their families as well as institutions dealing with them - learn about their legal rights and how to defend such rights.