

Introduction

Wataneya Society is an Egyptian non-profit organisation founded in 2008 to “To create a future of equal opportunities for children and youth without parental care through innovative solutions to unify, and certify all aspects of alternative care.” (Wataneya Society, 2019). To be able to reach this goal, Wataneya Society in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS¹) and civil society organisations had to lead the reform of the alternative care sector in Egypt. Wataneya Society is the first NGO specialized in strengthening the alternative care for children in Egypt through developing systems and standards, building capacities and providing consultations.

Care Experience from a Care Leavers’ Perspective

When I was 9 years of age, I lived with 68 girls between the ages of 6 to 16, and 2 caregivers took care of us. The caregivers received only basic education, which greatly affected the way they dealt with us, they used wrong discipline methods with us. However, the consistency of having them from childhood until I transitioned from care created a strong bond between us.

What created the most security in the care home was the presence of my sisters. My relationship with my sisters was the main factor that helped me overcome many challenges faced while growing up.

I didn’t know what it entailed to be an orphan, I realized this when I first went to school. I faced discrimination and decided to hide the truth about my identity to avoid this hassle, I started talking opening about my identity when I was in my thirties.

One of the worst things in the care home was the psychological abuse, we were often belittled and looked at as incapable, they would often tell us “You should be thankful for what you have, without us you would be living on the street”. They didn’t know how to provide us with moral support. We received moral support from our older sisters and from the constant volunteers.

The care home’s management didn’t really care about us receiving high education. They encouraged all of us to go to nursing institute, where we shall study only for 3 years after middle school and then get a job then get married to the first suitor (the majority of my sisters are nurses). They thought we didn’t have what it takes to graduate from university. However, I wanted to pursue higher education. This created great conflict, however, I managed to successfully graduate from high school and university (school of social work).

My journey of leaving care was abrupt and filled with challenges. The care home’s management decided that all the girls who turned 18 would transition from the care home and shall take care of all their expenses (housing, food, clothing...etc.). I lived in a room with 17 girls in a student housing arrangement.

¹ Ministry of Social Solidarity

Many children and youth without parental care in Egypt face similar challenges like Nahla El Nemr². They often are cared for by unqualified caregivers, face prejudice in their communities just because they were raised in a care home, do not have access to proper educational and vocational training opportunities, and leave care prematurely without adequate support (Ethnasios, 2012; Fawzy & Fouad, 2010; Gibbons, 2005; Thomason, 2008).

Children without parental care ([Annex A](#)), often reside in care homes, with a living parent, with extended family or live on the street. The majority of children without parental care have living relatives, however, due to poverty; (29.7 percent of Egyptians live under the poverty line) (World Bank, 2021) many families either place their children in care homes or abandon them, because they don't have adequate resources to take care of them or due to the lack of proper investigation the child might end up in a care home unnecessarily. The main reasons for placement in alternative care is poverty leading to abandonment, out of wedlock birth, losing one or both parents, being lost from one's parents, having severely ill parents and broken families (due to divorce or remarriage of a parent).

Placement in an Alternative Care Setting

Infants are often placed in an alternative care option without proper investigation. This occurs due to the gap between policy and practice with regards to alternative care. The Child Law (article 20, 1996, 2008) explicitly declares the need of conducting a proper investigation before placing an infant or a child in an alternative care setting, however, due to the lack of necessary skills and knowledge to conduct this investigation many of the children are placed in an alternative care option unnecessarily, where most of the children might have living capable relatives who can take care of them.

Process of placement in an alternative care setting

When infants are abandoned, they are placed in residential nurseries which are supervised by the Ministry of Health. Infants could be placed in *Kafala*/ alternative families from the age of 3 months old or they stay in residential nurseries until they are two years of age, when they are moved to residential nurseries supervised by the Ministry of Social Solidarity until they reach the age of 6. Afterwards they are moved to a care home supervised

² A care leaver and the first ambassador of the Ministry of Social Solidarity for community monitoring on care homes, she joined Wataneya Society in 2012 and currently she is a team leader responsible for assessing The Quality Standards in care homes.

by MoSS. The frequent moves if not conducted with careful planning and appropriate coordination might put many children at risk of emotional disturbances (Fawzy & Fouad 2010). In some cases children might stay in the care home from birth if the care home was prepared to care for infants, and received an approval from the Minister of Social Solidarity.

Alternative Care Options in Egypt

Care Homes

Number of children in Care homes

The number of children registered in care homes is 12,015 (UNICEF & CAPMAS, 2016), however, this number greatly underestimates the reality as there are many care homes that are not registered under the Ministry of Social Solidarity, making it really difficult to estimate the correct number of children in care homes (Ethnasios, 2012).

Number of Care homes

The number of registered care homes in Egypt is divided to 473 residential institutions (caring for children from age 6 to 18) and 75 shelter nurseries (caring for children from age 2 to 6) (UNICEF & CAPMAS, 2016), 72.6% of them are located in; Cairo, Giza, Alexandria and Gharbia governorates (MoSS).

***Kafala* System/ Alternative Families System**

Kafala/ alternative families' system is the formal family-based care system that works in Egypt, since adoption is illegal (Child Law article 4, 1996, 2008). *Kafala* entails a contract between MoSS and the family. However, the child does not inherit the family or assume their name (the child could either assume the father's name or the family name, but not the full name). Furthermore, the child should know from the very beginning that he/she is not the biological child of the family to preserve his/her identity (Muslim Women's Shura Council, 2011; Sayed, 2013). There are currently 11,500 children in *Kafala* families.

Transitioning from Care

Children without parental care in Egypt are usually forced to leave their care homes by the age of 18 if they were males or until they complete their education (Child Law article 48, 1996, 2008). One of the main challenges facing youth transitioning from care in Egypt is the lack of housing, education, social pension and physical and mental health support. This challenge is caused due to the discrepancies between the legal framework and the different Ministerial policies for children without parental care. Furthermore, there is no system that monitors and tracks the progress of youth transition from care and the needed interventions that they might need (Thomason, 2008).

Reform of Alternative Care in Egypt

Multiple efforts have been made to promote the care and protection of children since Egypt ratified the convention on the rights of the child in 1990 and The African Charter for the Rights and Welfare of the Child in the same year. The child law was issued in 1996 and amended in 2008, which was a marked step in protecting children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

In 2014 Wataneya Society in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Solidarity and civil society organisations developed and mandated the National Quality Standards for Care Homes for Children without Parental Care (NQS) in order to standardise care received in care homes in Egypt. The NQS is based on the UN Guidelines for the Alternative of Children (2009), best practices in the field of alternative care and Wataneya Society's experience in piloting the standard with 7 care homes. This was an essential step to guarantee that children and youth residing in care homes receive the same quality of care. The NQS consists of 300 indicators divided into six main pillars, namely child protection, integrated childcare, staffing, management and documentation, professional practices, and building and facilities. Certainly care homes managers and caregivers needed extensive training and coaching to be able to develop their management system. Additionally, they particularly needed training in child protection. Training programs were conducted to Ministry assessors (social workers responsible for monitoring care homes), to coach them on how to make sure that the care home applied the standards. Additionally, to raise their awareness that their role is to support the care home to take good care of the children and youth rather than inspect the care home.

In 2015, the Egyptian government started taking marked steps in its journey towards de-institutionalisation aligning with Egypt's vision of 2030. It started with a presidential decree to amend article (46) in the Child Law (1996, 2008). It should be noted that de-institutionalisation in the Egyptian context does not mean closing down all care homes and replacing them with family-based care options. because a country like Egypt with such high poverty rate (29.5%) (World Bank, 2021) and high child abuse rate within biological families (93%) (UNICEF, 2016), this would be very unlikely. However, it means closing down large care homes that operate more like an institution rather than a home (caring for more than 20 children, having a very high ratio of child to caregiver,...etc.), and replacing those with small care homes that offer an environment that is as close to a family setting as possible. Additionally, it means having institutional care as a last resort rather than a first option. Furthermore, the Ministry of Social Solidarity stopped licensing care homes in Egypt unless absolutely necessary stating that the current care homes utilize only 60% of their capacity. Finally, MoSS formed the Higher Committee for Alternative Families to promote the *Kafala*/ alternative families' system. The committee was also successful in lobbying for amendments in the Executive Regulations of the Egyptian Child Law (January, 2016) and (June, 2020) to facilitate the process of *Kafala*.

In 2021, in order to bridge the gap between policy and practice with regards to alternative care, MoSS in collaboration with Wataneya Society and UNICEF developed a draft of the unified Alternative Care Law. It is going to be the first time in Egypt to have a law addressing all aspect of care, support, and legalities related to children and youth without

parental care. It reflects the key UN Guidelines for Alternative Care and aims at setting a legal framework for different alternatives of care for children and youth. In parallel, MoSS is working on restructuring its departments to reflect the strategy and the law.

Additionally, MoSS launched a 7 year- National Strategy for alternative care. The strategy includes 7 main objectives that aim to reform the alternative care system.

Recommendations

In order to promote the care and protection of children and youth without parental care, the Egyptian government in collaboration with civil society organizations need to:

- Establish accurate data collection mechanisms to identify the real size of the problem and to be able to provide tailored interventions to children and youth without parental care. This is particularly important for youth plus the age of eighteen as currently there are no mechanisms to identify the number of youth who transition from care and whether or not they were able to reach independence.
- Address root causes of family separation and strengthen gatekeeping mechanisms. As stated above one of the main reasons for placing children in care homes is poverty. As a result, financial and social support should be provided to the biological parents to prevent the enrollment of the children in alternative care all together. Additionally, if the child was abandoned and their biological parents were not known, proper investigation should take place to track the birth parents of the child, and provide assistance to the extended family to care for the child (if the birth parents were incapable of taking care of the child). The best interest of the child should be the guiding principle in the reintegration and placement efforts.
- Enhance the monitoring system of care homes to be able to accurately identify the quality of care provided. Additionally, to identify the unregistered care homes and take the legal actions necessary to prevent the presence of unregistered care homes which puts children at risk of child protection violations.
- Establish a strong system to ensure proper placement of children in suitable *Kafala*/ alternative families, while monitoring closely to make sure that children are well protected and cared in order to prevent violations.
- Establish a strong social work system particularly specialised in child and youth care workers. This entails developing tailored university programs that equips social workers to take proper care of children and youth without parental care, make informed decisions about a child's best interest, enable them to monitor care homes, and make proper decisions in placing children in the suitable *Kafala* families as well as monitor the placement.
- Activate the role of para-social workers in alternative care to enhance the professional capacity of the social workforce while providing standardized training, and support to guarantee standardization of the offered services.

- Develop the laws and the working conditions of the caregivers, and accrediting a license that would be renewed periodically and making it mandatory to be hired in the field of caring for children without parental care.
- Establish a robust aftercare system that ensures that youth without parental care have access to the needed services and support necessary to have a successful transition to independence.
- Enable and empower youth without parental care to take an active role in the alternative care reform. In addition to empowering them to represent youth without parental care in legislative assemblies like; the Parliament and the People's Assembly to be able to voice their opinions and be included in the decision making.
- Engage media professionals and influencers to be part of the alternative care reform to address the societal stigma of children and youth without parental care.

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Annex A

Egypt is a country of 1.1 million people (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics-CAPMAS, 2020), 40.1% of them are children. There are some statistics of children without parental care in Egypt, however, the accurate number is unknown. Children without parental care in Egypt include children who lost one or both parents, some of the categories of children at risk, and children who were placed in a care home by their own parents. According to the Ministry of Health and Population (2014), there are 3.6% of Egyptian children who have lost one or both parents, meaning that there are 1.45 million children who lost one or both parents. Children who lost one or both parents constitute only a small percentage of children without parental care. Additionally, there are approximately between 90 to 2 million children at risk (Caritas-Egypt, 2018).