Voluntary Motherhood?

A study on seven Lebanese SOS Children’s Village Mothers

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Abstract

Title: Voluntary motherhood- A study on seven Lebanese SOS Children’s Village Mothers.

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The purpose of this project is to study the women involved in the SOS Children’s Villages; the influence of the association on their views on life, as seen from a human-rights and a religious perspective. Questions such as why they chose to work with the association and what it gives them to do so are treated in this study.

My goal has been to study and present different aspects of something so important, but yet so unfamiliar. The method used in this project is minor field studies, which means visiting the villages, living with the families and observing their daily lives. The means of acquiring the information necessary for this study is by qualitative interviews with the mothers.

A theoretical framework has been used as a complement to the study, and it is also used to bring greater understanding to the SOS mothers and how they have shaped their lives.

My ambition with this essay is to bring out their individual experiences on how they view their own lives at present and what meaning life has given them. I have used seven of the 14 interviews conducted.

The outcome shows that several factors play important roles as to why the mothers decided to work with the association. Such factors were socioeconomic and sociopsychologic factors. Other conclusions that were drawn after this field trip were that the women are very vulnerable to the social situation in Lebanon; they need someone to support them since the men are the primary providers. If the women do not find someone to marry they need to find another source for provision, and the SOS Children’s Association is one way to go. The Sense of Coherence that these women had was indeed strong, hey felt meaningfulness in what they did, the had comprehended the situations at hand and could manage the situations as predictable have the confidence to know that everything will work out in the best way possible.

Keywords: SOS Children’s Villages, Lebanese Association of SOS Children’s Villages, Children’s Rights, Lebanon, Sense of Coherence, The Convention on the Rights of the child.
One day I could no longer stand to see these children suffer and I felt that there had to be a way to help them. There had to be a way to bring the children back to society. Make them “our” children; give them a mother, brothers and sisters, and a home where they can live a regular life just like all other children can. The development of our social system is based on our efforts to cooperate with each other in our daily lives. Real progress depends on the contribution that each human being is prepared to give towards a better, more just and more peaceful world.

(Hermann Gmeiner)
Acknowledgements

I want to take the opportunity to thank the SOS Children’s Association for taking me in and opening up their organisation for me and my research. They have helped me tremendously and I am certain that this study would have been impossible to conduct without help from the association. I also want to thank the mothers that gave me some of their precious time to let me interview them and discover the lives that they lead. I have never met a group of people with such solidarity, where nothing matters except each child’s individual character, and with nothing but love for each other. It brings me joy to see that kind of love!

I also want to give many thanks to the Swedish Missions Council for giving me financial aid in the form of a scholarship that made this extraordinary journey even possible. If it hadn’t been for them I never would have had the chance to conduct the field studies, so thank you very much.

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Introduction

Lebanon is a nation that has been haunted by war and conflicts for decades. With war comes death, the death of innocent civilians, adults. These people might have children that they involuntarily leave behind. Sometimes entire families become obliterated, with the exception of children that might survive. If that was to happen, it would mean that the children would have nowhere to go, and would probably head for the streets, for the rest of their lives. Life on the streets a child should never have to go through. Hermann Gmeiner realised this in Austria after World War II. He had the idea; of giving orphaned and abandoned children a new home in a house, with a mother. His idea was at first concentrated to Austria and Europe for years before it spread across the world, with the first SOS village in Daegu, Korea.

As children are the future generation of leaders of our world, it is extra important to give them a good upbringing with love and security, in order for them to develop into independent and strong individuals, able to take on any task appointed to them. The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that one must put the children’s best first. It is a child’s right to have a family, be safe, acquire education and the freedom of expression; and these are only a few of the rights that children of our world have.

In order to authenticate and encourage these rights, children need someone to look after them, teach them and take care of them. In the case of being an orphan, having social problems at home or any other difficulty that might take away these rights, the SOS Children’s Associations are present in approximately 140 countries to make sure that these children are being taken care of. The ones that do take care of these children are the village mothers, which are not always given a lot of attention. That is why it is interesting to study them, their feelings and their opinions about what life looks like in an SOS Village. The aspect that is stressed in this study is how their lives have developed, and what their attitudes towards life are today, as opposed to before getting in touch with the organisation.
**Aim**

The aim of the project is: To study the women involved in the SOS Children’s Villages; the influence of the association on their views on life, as seen from a human-rights and a religious perspective. This study will be conducted by visiting three of the four Children’s Villages of Lebanon; Sferai, Ksarnaba and Kfarhay. I will be dealing with the view on life of the SOS mothers; how their lives changed after getting involved in these projects and what their view on life is now compared to what it was before. I will also do a comparison of their experiences, comparing the mother’s that have been working for a while with the newcomers.

**Questions at issue**

In relation to the aim, I intend to find answers to the following questions:

- What made these women get involved with the project?
- How does it feel to raise children who are not theirs biologically?
- How have their views on life changed after starting as SOS mothers?
- Why do they help these children?
- How great impact does religion have on their every-day-life?

**Outline**

This essay will, after these introductory parts, include a part describing the material that I have used and also the means it took to collect the information. After a description of the material and the method, a segment follows where I give background information concerning Lebanon and its civil war, and along with that an introduction to the work of SOS Children’s Association, a brief history of the association and their work in Lebanon. After these introductory segments follows a part where I present the results from the interviews conducted during my fieldwork and I will answer the questions asked in the headline “Questions at issue”. Thereafter follows an analysis and a discussion of the results that of the study.
Material and method

When doing research on such a large organisation as the SOS Children’s Villages, it tends to be relatively hard to get an accurate grip on how the organisation works in diverse countries.

There is very little research done on the organisation, and even fewer descriptions of it as an entirety. Due to this it is difficult to conduct a literary study on the organisation. “One reason that forced me to think new was the sordid fact that there was no good Swedish literature for the presentation of the problem that the students had chosen”\(^1\). This might be the first obstacle that constructs the idea of being there, in person to collect certain information about a chosen subject. Another reason for going on a fieldtrip is that when conducting a literary study you are limited to acquiring the knowledge through books or articles, but with a fieldtrip as an additional source of information, because the perspective widens and the researcher is allowed to see tangible examples of the object of study. I had no idea of what to expect before getting on the plane to visit a foreign lifestyle. It felt good to be able to read about this perspective in a book\(^2\), which proved to me that I was not the only one who wondered. Reality is so much more comprehensible and adds new dimensions to whatever subject that is chosen.

The best way to acquire a personal understanding is to visit the organisation and listen to the involved people’s portrayal of how the association works. Those who work within the association have the best insight on how it functions. “All understanding begins with where you stand yourself”\(^3\).

The most important method is the fieldtrip that I made to Lebanon which was in May through June of 2006, duration of approximately eight weeks.

“Field”, through the perspective of research, means that the empery that the field studies work up is field data. The data that is collected and worked upon exists outside of the school as an institution. Data is field data because it is made up of situations and experiences from “reality”?\(^4\).

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\(^1\) Fahlgren 2002: 12 My translation from Swedish
\(^2\) Fahlgren 2002
\(^3\) Ibid. 19 My translation from Swedish
\(^4\) Fahlgren 2002: 19 My translation from Swedish
The information that I have acquired and that is not collected from printed sources are based upon my primary sources; the Village mothers that have informed me about their lives. Working with interviews as a base for collecting knowledge in this intense manner is completely new to me.

As a preparatory assignment I was given four books to read concerning different kinds of methods on how to conduct research in different manners. One of the books called “Kunskap utan väggar”5 provided me with various guidelines on what to think about during field research and how to manage the information that one gathers during the interviews. Among other things they presented methods, in the second part of the book, they share a few detailed descriptions of methods that can be useful to use during the fieldwork.

The authors also present different examples of these methods, which helps the reader to portray them and really understand them thoroughly. Two of the techniques that I got fixed on were writing a diary and using mind-maps, and I also used them both. The diary is foremost for the interviewer’s personal thoughts that might come up during a session. It is then suitable to have a small book or a pad close by to write everything down right away. Otherwise you might risk forgetting a lot of the thoughts that passed through during the interview. The diary was also excellent for the ability to recall the informants individually. It is sometimes easy to mix them up when they are as many as 14.

The mind-map was used mostly prior to the trip. I used it to write down different aspects and angles of what I sought through the interviews. The mind-map helped me to shape the list of questions that was used during the interviews. The means for research that one uses depends on what type of research one is planning to carry out. The first choice stands between either a qualitative or a quantitative method. Since I have chosen to focus on each person individually and not the answers in general in these interviews; I see it necessary for me to use a qualitative method. The questions that I will ask at the beginning of my research require that I put a lot of effort on each informant. I have to listen to what they have to say and after that analyse in a religious or human rights perspective, primarily the human rights of children.

5 Fahlgren 2002.
In order to bring an understanding to the SOS mothers’ feelings and attitudes towards their lives, and the way their lives have turned out, I find it important to have a theoretical framework of some sort to support the arguments in this study, which is why I have chosen to include the theory of Aaron Antonovsky known as Sense of Coherence.

One headline in this study will be devoted to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child\(^6\), which I think will be important in order for the reader to understand some of the rights of a child, and how the SOS Association applies these rights in their work. The convention was entered in force long after the first SOS Children’s Village was founded in Lebanon, but I still see connections with the work of the SOS Association and the Convention, which I why I have chosen to use it in my study. Although the convention and the Association are not contemporary with each other, the convention is utterly important to the work of the International SOS Association of Children’s Villages, as it is for the Lebanese Association of Children’s Villages.

My goal has been to study and present different aspects of something so important, but yet so unfamiliar. I also want to point out that all of the data that I have collected is only a broad estimate of how life appears to these women, since I am only interviewing 14 women in three villages of only one country. I am calling it a broad estimation since there is currently a total of 423 villages in 131 countries all over the world.\(^7\)

My ambition with this essay is not to give a statistic summary of how the SOS mothers’ lives have changed, because according to me that is not even possible. What is of importance to me is to bring out their individual experiences on how they view their own lives at present and what meaning life has given them. I have used seven of the 14 interviews as I consider the whole study to become too immense if I had used the answers from all of the interviews conducted. All answers from the interviews included will be presented\(^8\), but not in the report. My choice of informants to be represented in this study is based on the answers that they gave me during the interviews. These seven were the ones that fully understood the questions they

\(^6\) Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989
\(^7\) Booklet from the Lebanese Association of SOS Children’s Villages
\(^8\) The answers from the interviews are appended with this essay.
were asked, which is why I believe that they are most compatible to this study and the issues being treated.

The choice of informants was at first a comparison between old and new coming SOS mothers. By old I refer to the ones that have been working in the villages for over ten years, and new coming are the ones that have worked for less than five years; the most recent has been working for four months. After having visited the first village, I felt that the list of questions was not complete. Some questions that I had included were not necessarily important, because they were the kind of questions whose answers might be obtained by opening a webpage belonging to the SOS International Association. For this reason I decided to change the list of questions modestly after my first visit. I changed it to make it more personal for each informant.

I also changed the list of questions because I constantly received the same answers to some questions. One of the questions was: “Considering the religious plurality within Lebanon, how are the children placed in families?” After the first two interviews I was certain that Muslim children were placed with Muslim mothers, and Christian children with Christian mothers, with some exceptions. This kind of information was irrelevant to what I was looking to find in the answers, hence the changes in the list of questions.

In order to gather information about the historical background of the Lebanese Civil War I have used two books. One is called From Beirut to Jerusalem and the other is called Pity the nation: Lebanon at war.

While I was visiting the village of Kfarhay, I was privileged to get an interview with the village director, who they called Ammo Johny. “Ammo” in Arabic means “uncle”. So the children saw him as their uncle, or better yet father. He gave me his reflections on the mothers that I had interviewed. As I chose to use three of the mothers in the interview I will also share his reflections and thoughts about the mothers. I would like to state that Ammo Johny’s opinion will not affect the outcome of my study. It is merely an outside perspective on the

9 According to the date of the interview, this was on June 6-2006.
10 The list of questions is appended with this essay.
11 Friedman 1995.
mothers, set aside from their own experiences that are the essences of this study. The mothers’ experiences are the ones that are depicted and studied.

Assumed names have been used all through this essay in order to protect the identities of my informants, and the names have been chosen by me. This is in order for me to protect their personal interests. I believe that it is their personal interests and integrity that has made this essay possible, which is why I have chosen to present them with concealed identities.

Theoretical framework

In order to understand the SOS mothers and their situations, I find it necessary to have a framework of some sort to relate to. I have found it interesting to introduce and present a sociological study on how some people manage to stay healthy, even though they go through rough experiences in their lives. This study has focused more on why and how people stay healthy, instead of what makes them ill.

Professor Aaron Antonovsky came up with the term Sense of Coherence (SOC) after a study he had made in 1970. He had compared the adjustment of Israeli women to their menopause. Some of the women were survivors of Concentration Camps of the Holocaust during World War II, while the rest were a control group. When he discovered that 29% of the survivors were in complete mental health, considering what life had brought them, he was surprised that as many as 29% were doing so good. 51% of the control group was also in a good health. The astonishment still laid in the group of women from Concentration Camps, and that is where Antonovsky’s research took a new turn. He started investigating how people stayed healthy physically, instead of why they became ill when put through difficult events. The results were known as the salutogenic model; which focuses on the origin of health, and were first published in 1979 in his book Health, Stress, and Coping.\(^\text{13}\)

It might be appropriate to clarify that the concept of SOC has been modified since it was first mounted in 1979. I have taken parts of the definition from the first publication\(^\text{14}\) to the latest I could find, translated into the Swedish language.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Antonovsky 1979.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\)
The sense of coherence is a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one’s internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected.\textsuperscript{16}

Antonovsky means that one might view health as a continuum, where the extremities are ease or disease, and that one should focus more on what keeps people healthy instead of what makes them ill. According to Antonovsky, the level of the Sense of Coherence within a person is what decides where a person finds him/herself on the scale of continuum between ease and disease.

According to Antonovsky, SOC is defined through three conceptions which are comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness.\textsuperscript{17}

Comprehensibility constitutes the well-defined, pronounced essence of the original definition. It aims at the extension to which one experience inner and outer stimuli as rationally tangible, as information which is orderly settled, coherent, structured and clear rather than noisy- that is chaotic, disorganized, random, unexpected and inexplicable. A person with a high sense of comprehensibility expects that the stimuli that he or she will encounter in the future will be predictable, or that the stimuli, when surprising, will easily be arranged and explained.

Manageability, which is the second component, is the extent to which one experiences that there are resources at one’s disposal. With the help of these resources one can meet the demands that are made by the stimuli than one is bombarded by. “At one’s disposal” can be referred to as resources that are under one’s control or that are controlled by others that are qualified- a spouse, friends, colleagues, God, history, a party leader, a doctor- anyone that a person feels is trustworthy. If a person has a high sense of manageability one will not feel as a victim to the circumstances or feel that life is treating one unfairly.

\textsuperscript{15} Antonovsky 2005. All citations from this book are translated from Swedish to English by me.
\textsuperscript{16} Antonovsky 1979: 123
\textsuperscript{17} Antonovsky 2005: 44 -45.
The third component, *meaningfulness*, was also implied in the original definition of SOC where Antonovsky warned about “too great an emphasis on the cognitive aspect of the sense of coherence.”\(^{18}\) He means that it is important to be involved “as a participant in the processes shaping one’s destiny as well as one’s daily experience.”\(^{19}\) Later on, Antonovsky defined meaningfulness as the component for motivation. If one is involved in laying out and forming their life, and participate actively in doing so, one will feel motivated to continue, and will sense a stronger SOC rather than just waiting to see what destiny has in store for the future. Meaningfulness is the central of these three components, and is a requirement for genuine and lasting comprehensibility, and high manageability.

The latest definition of SOC is:

> Sense of coherence is a global attitude that expresses to what extent one has a penetrating and lasting but dynamic sense of trust that (1) the stimuli that originate from one’s inner and outer world through the passage of life are structured, predictable and comprehensible, (2) the resources necessary for a person to be able to meet the demands that these stimuli make on one are accessible, and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investing and engaging oneself in.\(^{20}\)

Antonovsky recognises a phenomenon called *Generalised Resistant Resources* (GRRs) as independent variables, which help a person cope with the demands made on him or her.

Antonovsky wrote:

> Because of the demands which are made on people are so variegated and in good part so unpredictable, it seems imperative to focus on developing a fuller understanding of those generalized resistance resources which can be applied to meet all demands.\(^{21}\)

Life experiences are characterised by consistency, participating in shaping outcome and an underload-overload balance of stimuli, and shape the sense of coherence according to Antonovsky. He means that

> …the more these experiences are characterized by consistency, participation in shaping outcome, and an underload- overload balance of stimuli, the more we begin to see the world as being coherent and predictable.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{18}\) Antonovsky 1979: 127.

\(^{19}\) Ibid. 128

\(^{20}\) Antonovsky 2005: 46

\(^{21}\) Antonovsky 1979: 5

\(^{22}\) Antonovsky 1979: 187
Reoccurring life-experiences of this nature build up SOC. All of these factors are, according to Antonovsky, closely linked to comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. The underlying presumption is that GRRs with necessity gave us all three types of experiences.

The experiences that these women have endured during their lives prior to and after becoming SOS mothers may have shaped them into what they are. What I am interested in study at this point is how this framework can be applied to the lives they lead today.

**Research background**

As already stated; it was very difficult to find any previous research on the SOS Children’s Villages. I did find a small book with a total of 63 pages[^23]. This book discusses the history of the organisation, the idea, how it expanded across the world and how the organisation works. The information that I have used in this essay come primarily from this book, and from the SOS Kinderdorf International website[^24]. I also used the Swedish website[^25] for information, and found that the two websites had the same information through comparison.

The information I was seeking from these websites were mostly about the founding of the International Association within Lebanon and I used the information found on these WebPages as I see that they are the best sources for finding the most accurate information possible.

**Historical Background**

**Lebanon**

In 1958 the first Lebanese civil war went off and was a political crisis caused by political and religious tensions in the country. Tensions between Lebanon and Egypt had escalated earlier in 1956 due to the fact that the Lebanese President at the time, Camille Chamoun, who was a Christian, did not end diplomatic relations with the Western powers that hit Egypt during the

Suez Crisis, infuriating Egyptian President Jamal Abdul Nasser. Due to the crisis going on in Lebanon, the American president of that time, Eisenhower, was requested to help Lebanon by Camille Chamoun. American troops were sent in to try and keep the peace in the country, with a total of 15,000 soldiers, which they succeeded with. On October 25th 1958 the U.S. forces could withdraw²⁶.

**SOS Children’s Association**

Austria was a country where the outcome of World War II was very evident. A few years after the war a young, former soldier was wondering what solutions there could be to the problem. All of the children that had become orphans needed help and someone to take care of them, and the young man, named Hermann Gmeiner, felt that a psychologist or any other expert wasn’t enough. He felt that they could only become good citizens if there was a mother figure present in their lives. A woman that would love, cherish and take care of them at all times. He said that that would be the best therapy for the children, and that is how the idea of SOS-Children’s Villages was created.

From experiences in his childhood, Hermann realised that a woman, even without children of her own, could function as a mother. He had lost his own mother at an early stage of his life, and his sister took on the role as a mother and managed to keep the family of nine children together. His sister’s efforts became essential to his vision of the SOS mother’s position within the organisation.

The first SOS-village was built in the village of Imst, Austria, on a piece of land that was donated by the village’s delegate. After a family tragedy where five children had lost their mother, they were the first to move in to their new home, being lovingly welcomed by their new mother on Christmas Eve in 1950.

For the following ten years the organisation worked within Europe, until in 1963, when the first village outside of Europe was built in the village of Daegu, in Korea.

**Lebanese Association of SOS Children’s Villages**

The successful idea of giving orphaned and forsaken children a new family and a new home in an SOS Village became well-known all over the world, even in Lebanon. The idea of building SOS Villages in Lebanon was first recognized and founded in 1964. A government agreement was signed and registered at the Ministry of Internal Affairs under No.189/AD. In 1966 the Lebanese Association was established. Three years later the first family was able to move in to the first SOS Village, the village of Bhersaf.

**The Convention on the Rights of the child**

The Convention on the Rights of the child was adopted and opened for signature on 20th of November in 1989. It was then entered into force on September 2nd of 1990. This declaration of rights is the fundamental guide to the rights of children, where the states parties to the present Convention are:

...Convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community... Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding... Recognizing that, in all countries in the world, there are children living in exceptionally difficult conditions, and that such children need special consideration...  

The declaration consists of two parts, the first discusses the many rights of children, and the second discusses the work of the committee.

States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. Such determination may be necessary in a particular case such as one involving abuse or neglect of the child by the parents, or one where the parents are living separately and a decision must be made as to the child's place of residence.

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27 Lebanese Association of SOS Children’s Villages Brochure
28 General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989  
29 Preamble on the Convention on the Rights of Children  
One of the reasons why children are sent to live in the SOS Villages is because of the familiar situations, where the child might be abused or neglected. These social factors are only a few of the reason why the children are sent to the villages.

“When considering solutions, due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background”\(^\text{31}\) which is taken into consideration when the social workers, directors and mothers are gathered to discuss the placement of a new child.

States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.\(^\text{32}\)

Apart of the education that the mothers attain, the surroundings of the villages are commonly constituent of uninhabited land, set aside from a nearby village, but never close to a larger city. Only the locations of the villages themselves are meant to heal the children of the villages mentally and spiritually, and are essential for the healing process.

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment… Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.\(^\text{33}\)

The Villages

The villages are usually situated outside of a city. The houses are built accordingly to fit the surrounding architecture and the local traditional building standards are to be followed as much as possible. The houses are placed in a circular form, to be able to overview the rest of the houses from one house. The families help each other and share experiences. This way the children will learn to trust themselves and each other. The essentials for life in a village are

\(^\text{31}\) Convention on the rights of Children, Article 20:3
\(^\text{32}\) Ibid. Article 27: 1-2
\(^\text{33}\) Ibid. Article 39
peaceful co-existence that crosses barriers such as ethnic, cultural and religious belonging. The religious plurality in a country reflects on the religious plurality in the villages.

The children who are taken into custody by the villages come from different backgrounds. Some come from broken homes where the parents don’t have the ability to take care of them due to alcoholism, drug abuse or even poverty; others are orphans with a single mother without an income and some have been abandoned by their parents. If a women becomes pregnant without being married she is bound to become an outcast to her society, and because of the fear of being left out she might abandon her child or give it away.

Within the villages there are women called village aunts, and these women are there to assist the mothers whenever needed. They are also there to undergo the necessary education and training to eventually become mothers with families of their own. The parents that are still alive but are unable to take care of their children are allowed to visit the village on a regular basis. Some of the children even have the possibilities to visit their families outside of the villages during certain holidays.

**Bhersaf**

In the instantaneous surrounding region of the town of Bikfaya, the Village Bhersaf extends out along the winding mountain road, at an elevation of about 1000 meters above sea level. Pine woods surround the SOS Children's Village, which is built on the slope of the hill and takes pleasure in impressive views of the sea, the coastal towns and the capital, Beirut. Bhersaf was the first Village built in Lebanon. The first family moved in during the year of 1969. It consists of 12 Family Houses, one administrative building, housing for the SOS aunts, and the Village Director’s and his family’s house. In addition to the living areas, there are five workshops, a theatre, a shelter and living quarters for retired SOS mothers. Bhersaf is the home of 106 SOS Children.

**Sferai**

Sferai, the second SOS Children's Village in Lebanon, is small and is located about 16 km east of the old harbour city Sidon. Founded in 1981, the SOS Children's Village consists of ten family houses that were built in a traditional style prevailing in the country, and is
surrounded by cypresses and pine trees. The SOS Children's Village also includes a house for
the village director and his family, an aunts' house, an administration and service area, sports
and playgrounds, a house for retired mothers, a multi-purpose hall, a children's club and
workshops. Sferai can house up to 100 children.

**Kfarhay**

Kfarhay, the third village, is situated on a road that is connecting the coastal city of Batroun
with the town of Boxmaya, in the mountains. Kfarhay is approximately 60 km away from
Beirut, and was founded in 1995. SOS Children's Village Kfarhay is lined by a green hilly
country to the south and by the peaks of Mount Lebanon to the east.

The village consists of eleven family houses, a village director's house, an aunts' house,
administrative and service areas, playground and sports ground, a multi-purpose hall. The
SOS Children's Village of Kfarhay can currently take in up to 100 children.

**Ksarnaba**

The SOS Village Ksarnaba is located to the west of Ksarnaba, on the road to the city of
Baalbeck which is situated approximately 10 km north of Zahle, which is the largest city in
the Bekaa valley. It is the latest addition to the SOS Villages of Lebanon, and was opened as
late as April of 2006. It was built on grounds made available by the community authorities.

The SOS Children's Village in Ksarnaba includes 8 family houses, the village director's
house, the SOS aunts' house, administration and service areas, sports and playgrounds, multi-
purpose halls and a workshop. As this essay is being written, only five of eight families are
currently living in the village. Ksarnaba has the ability to house 72 children.
The SOS mothers

The most essential person for the personal development of a child is the mother. In this case it is the SOS mother who becomes the replacement of the biological parents. The SOS mother lives together with her children in their Village House and she organises the weekdays. She is the one who ties emotional bonds to each one of her children and makes them feel loved and secure. The mother is educated to take care of traumatized children. She is aware of and acknowledges each child’s background, cultural- and religious belonging. For some women a regular job is not satisfactory enough. For other women it is the social security that is imbedded in the companionship with other women that can be the ultimate cause for choosing to become an SOS mother.

The women should not have families of their own, but they should want to live in a “family” with children whom they can give all their love and care to. Both the selection and education of the SOS Village mother are the most important factors of working within the villages and are given a great deal of concern. Only wanting to become an SOS mother is not enough, the woman has to know exactly what will be expected of her when she starts her education. Prior to becoming mothers, all candidates get tested for suitability of taking care of children with special needs.

The following potential requirements are requested by most of the candidates:

- Being between the ages of 24 and 40
- Being skilled in reading and writing
- Having the marital status of being single, divorced or widowed, without children of their own.
- Being in a good physical and mental health.

Local considerations have to be taken concerning the criteria. The requirements of reading and writing skills can not be applied all over the world. The women go through a six month long educational programme which is very intensive. They acquire help and support from pedagogic personnel and from a permanent assistant. That assistant is often a woman who has the intention of becoming an SOS mother in the future and is also known as the village aunt as mentioned earlier.
The informants

I have chosen to present each of the mothers according to when the interviews were carried out. This means that the first interview will be presented first, and so forth.

**Mama Sabah**
Mama Sabah has worked as an SOS mother for 23 years, and including the children that she is raising at the moment, it sums up to a total of 24 children that she has had in her household. One of her daughters is now working in the same village as a social worker. Before she started working in the village she was working as a shop assistant at a children’s clothing store.

**Mama Maria**
Mama Maria has worked for four years and three months as an SOS mother, and has raised 11 children including the ones she has at the moment. What is worth pointing out is that she has the latest addition to the village, a baby boy. Before getting in touch with the SOS she worked several jobs, among others as a part of a folk dance group that travelled around and performed during the war. She had also been working as a teacher for seven years.

**Mama Layla**
Mama Layla has worked as an SOS mother for approximately 11 years and she has raised 14 children, including the ones at home. Before getting in touch with the SOS she underwent a secretarial schooling and worked as a secretary for almost a year after she received her diploma. After that she worked in a kindergarten.

**Mama Linda**
Mama Linda has worked as an SOS mother for 12 years and has raised 15 children, including the seven she has at home at the moment. Before getting in touch with the SOS she had different occupations. She worked as a secretary, a nurse, and in a monastery.
Mama Nawal
Mama Nawal has worked as an SOS mother for 11 years, and has raised 17 children, including the nine currently living with her. Before starting as a mother she worked as a seamstress, a hairdresser and a nurse.

Mama Kristine
Kristine is not a regular SOS mother. She takes in the new arriving children and prepares them both mentally and emotionally for their future lives in an SOS family. She has worked like this for two years and has “raised” eight children so far. Three are on the way. Before Kristine started as an SOS mother she was a nun, belonging to the Jesuit order. She had been a nun since the age of 13. She has also worked in another SOS village, Sferai, but there she worked in the office as a pedagogue. She was responsible for the education and for the international donators. She also tutored the children with learning-difficulties.

Mama Fatme
Mama Fatme has worked as an SOS mother for only four months (June 8th 2006) and she has six children at home, with three on the way. Before she started working as a mother she studied Arabic philosophy at the university.
Report

What made these women get involved with the project?

Mama Sabah
Mama Sabah liked the idea of a mother and her children living as a family in a house. The mother as the sole provider who feeds, bathes, tutors and loves the children is a much better alternative than an orphanage, where there is one person appointed to each task. There are no religious ties in the village either. Mama Sabah likes sincerity and doesn’t think that anyone should limit a child of learning and educating, she feels that these children need to be encouraged in whatever they choose to do. A mother should give a child as much as she can, and never make the child feel like an orphan. Of course there are rules to be followed within the SOS, but not the kind of rules that would choke a child. It is very important to bring out each child’s personality individually, because that is how the SOS works.

Mama Maria
Mama Maria’s sister worked with the SOS Village of Sferai 20 years ago and asked her to try working there, but she was very reluctant and didn’t like the idea very much at first. Seven years before she started to work in the village she had asked the Virgin Mary what to do with her life; then, shortly after, she had a dream where God came to her and spoke to her, in French. He showed her a village and said that that village was where her life would begin. When she finally visited the SOS village she remembered the dream and felt that she had found the village from the dream. She knew then that the SOS village was where her life would begin, and now she loves living there doing what she does.

At first Mama Maria arrived as an intern but soon she found herself at home. When you have a regular job, you finish at a certain time each day and go home, and you leave work at work for the rest of the day. When you raise children on the other hand, you never leave and you get something good back; which is seeing them grow and flourish.
**Mama Layla**
Mama Layla working in the village because she felt that it was a nice thing to do. Motherhood is very important to women, and to their lives. It doesn’t matter if the children are biologically her children or not, giving is important. Mama Layla enjoys working with children and helping them, in any form possible. She was offered a job at a bank, but turned it down as soon as she heard about the SOS Association in Lebanon. She didn’t know that they were working in Lebanon at first.

She now feels that she has achieved the goal that she had from the beginning, which was working with children; and she has also achieved her personal goal, which was having a family of her own. All of these achievements came through her conviction and through her faith.

**Mama Linda**
Mama Linda wasn’t doing what she wanted to do. She didn’t want to become a nurse, but the war left her no other option. Her family became isolated, and becoming a nurse was the only way out for her. Mama Linda comes from the southern parts of Lebanon, from the village of Sferai, where the second village is located.

She believes that God gives us life as a gift that we have to live. We have to accept both good and bad. Enjoy the good, and learn from the bad. You should never get stuck in anything, and always move on. The reason that she went to the village was because of the children (orphans) that are in need of care and love.

**Mama Nawal**
Mama Nawal had many different jobs, but her main goal was to become a hairdresser, which she did. She couldn’t continue working because she had to escape from the war. Her father and sister died during the war, and her family had no economical resources for her to develop within that line of work. Mama Nawal views life as both beautiful and ugly. When she had grown old enough to start enjoying the beauty of life as an adult, the war broke out and her family suffered from many tragedies at home. There was a massacre in her hometown.
In that massacre her sister, brother in law and two of their six children were killed. The surviving four were taken in by an SOS village, and that is how she got in touch with the SOS Association and found out about what they did. Mama Nawal likes raising children, which contributed to her start as an SOS mother.

**Mama Kristine**

Mama Kristine felt that her call was in the village, and she liked it. She is able to help the new coming children because she helps them on all levels necessary. She says that even though the children don’t come from you; you will still be there for them. When she passes over the children to their new mother she doesn’t have any problem with that because all of the children in the village are her children according to her. Mama Kristine sees the village as the body, and the mothers are the organs. They help each other and give each other. The children are the dough, and the mothers form them into beautiful shapes of bread. When they are finished you will feel pleased with the results.

Mama Kristine came to a point where she felt that the blood that was pumping through her veins was SOS blood. She says that she is not an employee; she is living with her family.

**Mama Fatme**

Mama Fatme loves children. Since she comes from a pretty wealthy family she didn’t have to work for money. She felt that she could take on a more rewarding job, and her brother suggested that she could apply for a job with the SOS village. She asked what would be required of her in order for her to start working as a mother. She found out that she met the requirements needed and that she fitted as an SOS mother.

Mama Fatme had very strong feelings towards motherhood and towards being a mother. Mama Kristine helped her, encouraged her and taught her about the values of a mother when Fatme got accepted as an intern. She sees herself as an affectionate person and she loves children. She feels convinced of what she is doing and she is not there for employment; but as a mother.
How does it feel to raise children who are not theirs biologically?

**Mama Sabah**
She loves children, whether they are her own or not. Her brother is married with children and she loves his children. She is able to love them as if they were her own. That is why she was able to work with SOS. When she first started she got a lot of young children. One of the children that she got was only five days old and she saw that baby as her own. She means that you can’t say that they are not her children, because they are. The younger the children are, the better you can deal with them. It hurts her when someone asks her those kinds of questions because she loves them and they are her own.

**Mama Maria**
Mama Maria says that you raise these children twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. She does everything a regular mother would do with all her love. The feeling of them not being her children disappears with all the things that a mother does. She grows to love them more for each day that passes, and that makes her see them as her own children.

**Mama Layla**
Mama Layla feels human emotions. After less than one week with a new child she has developed feelings of love towards the child. She feels like their mother, and gets them to see her as their mother and see the family as their own family. A mother is a mother, whether biological or not. Being a mother requires love and devotion.

**Mama Linda**
Raising the children gives Mama Linda a greater sense of responsibility. She has a greater fear of failing to raise the children, but she also has a greater hope for them to succeed in life. The fear and responsibility is towards the children that she is raising, and not towards their biological parents.
Mama Nawal says that the children don’t have anyone to take care of them, and they know that she is not their mother. Some do have a family, but the ones without a family become more attached. She is not acting her feelings; she gives everything she can for them and to them from her heart. A biological mother might not even give as much as she does.

**Mama Kristine**

She has been with the SOS for six years, and she has never felt that these children aren’t hers. From her point of view it’s all about conviction; you have to be convinced that the child that is coming to you needs you as its mother. Her children need her; they need her to be loving, understanding, friendly and warm. She is also convinced that a mother needs to work on herself too and develop. The benefit from developing would be the feeling of improvement rather than feeling empty as a result of giving. SOS works a lot on developing the mothers. “They ask us mothers what areas we feel that we need to develop in. At this point in time the Internet is developing and becoming more frequent, so we have to develop and acquire some knowledge in that area in order for us to communicate with and understand the children. These children are from another generation, and another age which we have to follow. You can’t go back to raising your children the way you were raised because it isn’t suitable.”

**Mama Fatme**

Mama Fatme doesn’t see the children that way, because otherwise she would see her role as a job in the field of raising children, as kindergarten for example. She sees her children as her own, as if they came from her. She raises them the way she was raised, and the way that she wants them to raise their own future children.

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34 Extract from the interview with Mama Jeanne D’arc, answer number 13.
How has their view on life changed after starting as an SOS mother?

Mama Sabah
Within the SOS the world is so wide and Mama Sabah didn’t know that there existed so much pain and suffering, or problems for that matter. Neither did she know that these children were in need of the amount of care that they do. At first she wasn’t sure if she could give them all of that either. Mama Sabah is proud of being an SOS mother because she is doing something for these children that not everyone can do.

Mama Maria
Mama Maria found the meaning in life by being a mother, and she also found what she had been searching for. The sense of emptiness from within disappeared.

Mama Layla
Mama Layla has become more mature. She has experienced renewal in her life and she has become more independent. Love is always present and shows the way to success. She has a home and a family. Her personal/private life has become less important.

Mama Linda
In general Mama Linda says she hasn’t changed, but in respect for things that she didn’t know existed, one might say that she has changed. She has had new experiences, and she learned new things. Life is still a gift, and we need to move on. This is one stop on the track of life; and she doesn’t know what the next stop will be after this. She says that she will not stay there forever.

Mama Nawal
God created us and gave us life; we are here in order to continue living. If we feel hopeless, it means that we do not obey God. We all go through different situations in life, and Mama Nawal went through the civil war, and it was violent and difficult. She continued living her life, and she is giving all she can to make the children feel safe and loved.
The life in the village becomes routine after a while, with a home and children to take care of. She stays at home most of the time, and she either loses contact or doesn’t have time for her friends outside of the village. The people in the villages get used to each other and they spend all of their free time in the village; they rarely see their families on the outside. There are no real opportunities to make new contacts.

Mama Nawal feels that she has a great responsibility towards the children. And she feels like she has been both parents to each child when the time comes for them to move on to the Youth homes.

**Mama Kristine**

She never expected that children were living under the conditions that they were. In her family, the family was considered sacred. She used to be very egoistic and conceited, and she used to look down on other people. When Mama Kristine went to the SOS she changed her view of the human being and she had to step down from her pedestal. She felt that she shouldn’t bully anyone. She started to devote all her time to these children, and she left no time for herself. “When you are devoting your time to others, you no longer become first priority.”

Mama Kristine has changed since she went to Ksarnaba. She has become more open minded and she loves all the children even more. She likes the constant strive forward. All of this didn’t come right away; she has worked on herself for a very long time.

**Mama Fatme**

It has changed a lot. Motherhood is big, a big call; and she can now understand what it is really about. It requires a lot of effort, patience and a very big heart. She says that she can now feel how much a mother gives, and how much we should give the mothers back. She has learned how to appreciate mothers.

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35 Extract from the interview with Mama Jeanne D’arc, answer number 15
**Why do they help these children?**

**Mama Sabah**
Everything that you give is out of love for the children. Mama Sabah has gained greatly from being a mother. It has given her safety and stability; it has given her the pride in being an SOS mother, and it has given her happiness. She is not only proud of herself, she is also proud of the children that she has at home at the moment; and of the 24 children that she has been and still is raising. The satisfaction of the grown children’s success in life makes her proud too. She sees the family as a big team that works together, so she is proud of all of them.

**Mama Maria**
Raising her children has given her a lot of things. She feels important to someone. What she does and what she gives is considered to be worth a lot.

**Mama Layla**
Seeing their joy, their success, and most importantly, love for their siblings; makes Mama Layla feel like she has achieved and reached her goal. Why? Because the children need her there. Orphans have lost their parents. They need the closeness that the mothers give; otherwise they wouldn’t have been there. This is only a small compensation for what they have gone through.

**Mama Linda**
First and foremost, the children need someone to help them. Orphans or abandoned children don’t have anyone to take care of them. It gives Mama Linda joy and keeps her motivated to see these little individuals make it through and succeed, after all the hard work that they go through together.

**Mama Nawal**
It gives Mama Nawal life to help these children. She is responsible for them, and she raises them. This is asked of her by the children and their families. She has sacrificed everything for them and has given them everything they need because of the tragedies that these children have gone through when they go to live in the villages.
Mama Kristine
A child needs to feel good, it needs to feel clean. A child needs to know how to eat properly and how to act properly in a gathering. If all of that happens, then that child will view society in a new point of view, and that child will start to like the society that he/she belongs to. When parents come to visit, they are surprised by their children; they can’t believe that those are their own children. They feel that their children are on a completely different level. These children are the future of Lebanon, this is a responsibility.

When Mama Kristine sees how a mother arrives to continue the work that she has initiated with the children, Mama Kristine is happy to see the results. She is not doing all of this because she studied abroad or because she was a nun; she is doing this because she saw how her mother treated her siblings at home. Even when she was in her mother’s womb she could hear her mother talking to her siblings.

When Mama Kristine deals with a child, she does not yell at it or hit it because that kind of language is not a part of her. If a child falls she asks it why it fell, if the child did something wrong she asks the child why it did something wrong. A child is a human being that understands if you simply speak to it instead of speaking at it. The child comes from a totally different environment, and she can’t bring that child to her environment, so they have to meet halfway.

She always sees the glass as half full, not half empty. The children see her as their lawyer, because she always looks to a child’s qualities, both good and bad.

Mama Fatme
Mama Fatme helps the children because they need her, along with the other SOS mothers; otherwise they wouldn’t have had to go there in the first place. She has to give them as much as they need; it all depends on the need. Some children need her more than others do. She feels proud of herself for helping these children.

When she sees the improving changes that the children are making; and when she sees how they start to feel good about themselves and how they have left their sufferings behind it feels like a massive stone gets lifted off her shoulders.
How great impact does religion have on their every-day-life?

Mama Sabah
Mama Sabah feels that there is a lot of love, compassion and forgiveness within the SOS, and she considers all those to be part of her religion. Within the SOS you consider everything as a part of religion. They don’t discriminate, but see the child as an individual and as a human being. They don’t differentiate between religion, ethnicity or skin colour. All religions preach that “thou shall love thy neighbour.”

Mama Maria
Mama Maria sees herself as religious. She is not radical, but she does believe in God. She prays at home with her children and she goes to church. As long as a person is away from God, that person will feel sadness. God fills your life with joy. They pray at home because prayer teaches the child how to act in a good manner. It is even psychological because you find inner peace when you pray. Prayer helps your soul grow; just like your body needs to be fed with food, the soul needs to be fed as well.

Mama Layla
Each mother is united with children from her own religion which makes things easier i.e. the cooperation and education concerning religion. Each mother gets to teach her own religion, in the best way that she knows how.
If Mama Layla had to take care of a Muslim child, she would take care of it and love it unconditionally, and she would get help with the religious education. When you live and feel nothing but love towards one another, it becomes much easier to express those emotions.

Mama Linda
Religion has a big effect on their daily life. Who’s ever life it is, prayer is a part of the family’s life. Mama Linda does discuss different issues with her children, and what religion allows them to do concerning these issues.
Mama Linda explains what the religion says, and then it is up to the children to choose their own path.

36 Matthew 22: 36-40
Mama Nawal
When there is a holiday, whether Christian or Muslim, the village invites a priest or an imam to mass for them. They also pray every day at home before eating; thanking God for everything He has given them. There is a special prayer for the SOS Association, which is not related to any religion. That means that everyone prays before eating, regardless of their faith. The month of May is the month of the Virgin Mary, and Mama Nawal has prayed every day of that month.

Mama Kristine
Religion is how you treat each other. She does pray and she does go to church. She doesn’t allow her religion to be limited, saying that she is a Christian. When she is truly a believer, and when she truly loves her religion, then her eyes should open up to all religions. Her religion helps her in knowing her God. Within religion there are several factors that exist, such as moral, giving, and the means of raising children. Mama Kristine takes help from the bible, but not by saying that Jesus did this or said that. If she really loves her Lord, with all of the values she have learned from religion, she doesn’t necessarily tell them where these values are from.

When she is raising a Muslim child she doesn’t make the child feel like he is not part of her religion, she raises them according to what she sees fits. She does respect all religions, and when there is a Muslim holiday, she works just as much with the preparations as a Muslim mother would, if not even more. Mama Kristine can call herself religious, but she is not conservative. She has great respect for other religions, and this is because she is so secure in her own religion.

Mama Fatme
Four of her children go to a Muslim school. They are not conservative; they pray, and say the SOS prayer before eating and sleeping every day and night.
Statements of Ammo Johny

Mama Nawal

Mama Nawal is calm. She is a housewife in the literary sense of the word. She is sensible and very conscious of herself. She walked in both her feet and moved on. She didn’t want to be an outsider, even though you sometimes feel fed up with things. All the things that happened were that she apprehended motherhood and got a home and children who were highly desired. The SOS gave and helped her to develop the pedagogic sides. Raising your children the way you were raised is not enough.

Education helps a person to raise the children in a better way. No rash or irrational upbringing. Nawal knows what she is doing. Had she gotten married and raised children of her own, she would have raised them the way she was raised. The SOS helps in raising children in a more pedagogically correct manner. Fahd has made mama Nawal experience motherhood more than the rest of her children since he was an infant when she got him. It is well known that she has a special relationship with him. Her motherly emotions reflect positively on her children. The children do not have to be biologically hers for a mother to experience motherhood.

Mama Layla

Mamma Layla was not considering motherhood. She applied for a job as a secretary. She said “I wasn’t thinking about it, I just wanted to apply for the secretary-job”. We replied by saying that we didn’t need a secretary but that she could apply as a candidate to become an SOS mother or just a village aunt (future mother).

During her training she started receiving information on pedagogic, and step by step she began to adjust. She used to stay at home with the mothers and alone with the children when the first mother had her time off. She had a good relationship with the children built on understanding. During the time a mother quit because her parents had grown old and needed care. Mama Layla said that she wanted to replace her. It turned out to be permanent when the children came and told me that they wanted mama Layla as their mother after only two months. Based on the children’s wishes I decided to let her stay with them. She went from one area to another. She was allowed to experience motherhood and that fact changed her life.
from the administrative tasks to being a full-time mother. She was going back and forth, but
today she is still here to 100%. That is a great change between then and now.

Some women are sensitive and think that they can handle it, but they do not know the truth.
Emotions alone are not enough. There needs to be a balance between mind and heart in order
for one to know where one is going when there is a goal, which is very important in life.

**Mama Linda**

She has of course changed through the children, but has loved them at the same time. She
came from a community with siblings knowing where she wanted to go from the beginning.
Linda interprets motherhood practically and not verbally. You notice, in her way of treating
the children, what she feels towards them. She is clear and honest with herself. Boldness
doesn’t always serve right, but she believes that what she does is right (speaking of her being
honest and bold)

The change that you notice with her is the way that she has adjusted considering that she
comes from a completely different environment. From having been a nurse with daily contact
with new people to devoting all of her time to little children. Earlier her devotion was to both
young and old. Maternal feelings helped her with raising her children. She was straight with
her children without hiding anything which we should be and which helped her a lot in
succeeding in her role.
Analysis

Mama Sabah
Of the informants that I have chosen to include in the report, Mama Sabah is the one that has worked the longest. She sees the importance of love in a child’s life, and she also sees the necessity in giving the child the freedom it needs to develop.
The reason for her decision to start as an SOS mother was that she loves children, whether they are her own or not, and she feels that the children that she is raising, and has raised, are her own children. It doesn’t matter to her that she didn’t give birth to these children, what matters to her is that she loves them.
In the interview Mama Sabah told me that she had always dreamed of getting married and starting a family of her own, but she was afraid of all that during the war. Maybe she was afraid that she would have children, and that something might happen to her and the children would lose their mother. She was also afraid that her or her possible husband wouldn’t be able to provide for their own children, in case she got married. That fear still lives on with her today, and she sees it as a result of the war and being kept away from her family.

When she began working with the SOS, I think she thought that she would have children of her own to raise in a house of her own, without having to get married and giving birth. The SOS is a well known organization and perhaps she thought that she would be safer there with the children, since the villages are not situated close to any of the bigger cities. The villages can be viewed as shelters, where not many would strike with bombs and where they could live their lives in as much peace as the war would allow them to.

Mama Sabah didn’t know that there was so much suffering existing in this world, and the worst of her realisations was that the ones suffering the most were children. The expectations that she had must have been different from the experiences she gained along the way. As a mother her life has become safer and more stable, and she takes a lot of pride in being an SOS mother and in the achievements that her children have accomplished.

Religion can be different things to different people, and to Mama Sabah it was not as much about praying as it was about how you treat the people around you, concerning love and compassion among other things.
**Mama Maria**

Mama Maria is a special case since her sister had worked in the village 20 years before she started. Her sister had even asked if Maria was interested in working with the SOS, and Mama Maria had turned the offer down. She claims she didn’t like the idea very much at that time. Later she says that she had asked the Virgin Mary for guidance, and seven years before she had started as a mother, God had come to her in a dream and told her where her life began, and that it would be in a village. What exactly made her change her mind and made her set foot in her village may have been the dream, but she had the dream seven years before she went there.

She even found herself at home in the village after going there. Her reluctance was turned into joy and comfort. She sees her role as very different from any ordinary job, because it is a twenty-four-hour duty. It is a lifestyle, and not just a job. Another difference according to Mama Maria is that she gains more feedback from being a mother than she would otherwise. She also gets rewarded in what she does, she obtains children that love her, children that grow and flourish, and it is all thanks to her being their mother.

Mama Maria says that the feeling of the children not being her own disappears with all the tasks she performs as their mother. She cooks for them, tutors them and loves them with all her heart, and that makes her their mother, even if not biological. The meaning of life was found in what she does, and the sense of emptiness disappeared. She feels important to someone, and she is needed by these children.

Religion to Mama Maria is different from what religion is to Mama Sabah. Prayer is an important key to Mama Maria and her children’s lives. They pray every day at home, and they go to church. Prayer is good for discipline because it makes the child act in good manors, and it is also good for psychological reasons, because she feels that one finds inner peace when praying. She sees religion, and praying as soul food, which is very important as nourishment for your wellbeing according to her.

**Mama Layla**

Mama Layla feels that it is a nice thing to do to raise these children. She sees giving as important and that motherhood also is important to women. Some may see this line of work as an opportunity to have children without having to marry, and some might not have found
anyone to marry and saw this as an easy way to have children and a house of their own. Mama Layla says that the reason she helps these children is because they need her, and I think that she needs them too. They grow, succeed and love their siblings, which is one of the many joys that Mama Layla witnesses in raising children that are not biologically hers. Can being an SOS mother be called a compensation, or maybe even charity?

Mama Layla also sees these children as her own, and those feelings, according to her, start to grow after merely a week with a new child. She wants them to love her as a mother, see the house as their new home and see the other children as their siblings.

Mama Layla has become more mature since she started, which was 11 years ago. She has also experienced renewal in her life and has become more independent. I think most of these women become more independent of others, because they have children that are depending on them instead. Of course she has people around her who are there for her if she needs them, but in first hand she has to take care of herself.

The answer on how great impact religion had on their lives was very vague to me. She says that every mother is united with children of her own religion, which makes things easier for the educational part of religion, which is very important in Lebanon. I didn’t really feel that I got the answer that I wanted in this sense, because I am already aware of what she told me. She always mentioned God during the interview, and said that it was his will that brought her to the SOS; and that, to me, seems like she is devoted to her religion in a sense. Living with love for one another is a good way of expressing the devotion for people, which is a part of religion as I interpreted her answer.

Mama Linda
Mama Linda had been isolated from society during the war, and couldn’t do what she wanted with her life. She had no other option than to become a nurse. In her interview she says that becoming a nurse was her only way out. Maybe she wanted to leave her family, or maybe even the village that she was living in. She was from Sferai, which is where the second SOS village is also located. This meant that she had known about the SOS Association before, but still chose to become a nurse at first. After realising that she didn’t want to be a nurse, she maybe thought that being an SOS mother was a better thing to do. Both jobs involve working
with people and helping people. She says that life, which we are bound to live, is a gift from God and with that comes an acceptance of both good and bad.

Mama Linda feels responsible by being a mother for her children, although she is not a biological parent. This might be because she knows what parents do to their children and therefore she feels responsible towards the children. She is raising these children on the basis that they will have a good future and a decent living when they are young. Mama Linda fears failing in raising her children because she knows that their futures depend on her. Mama Linda says that she hasn’t changed in general except for the things that she has learned along the way, things that she didn’t know existed. She also says that she has had new experiences, and that she has learned new things. “While learning I believe that one changes somehow. You might even say that one grows, which can also be a change.”

Maybe Mama Linda sees the word change as the change of her personality, whereas I mean a change as a whole. When the mothers first arrive at the villages they don’t know what to expect, and with time things start to sink in and they start a change they might not be aware of. One of the biggest changes is that they all became mothers over one night, which has to be a major change, even for women who give birth, regardless of all the preparations. Maybe they don’t become mothers over one night, but from not having any children to have up to nine, even though they are prepared for it, is a very big change. I am sure that the mothers themselves don’t see all the changes that they have gone through, but people from the outside are most likely to.

To Mama Linda and her family, religion does have a big effect. She says that they often sit and discuss different topics with each other at home, and that Mama Linda tells them what their religion allows them to do and not to do. She teaches them what her religion has taught her, and she then says that it is up to the children themselves to choose which path they want to take when they are old enough to do so. She says that they may choose for themselves, but if they do something that is not according to the teachings of their religion, will she be there and support them? Or will she reprimand them and lead them right, even though that is not what they wanted?

37 Quote from the interview with Mama Linda.
Mama Nawal

Mama Nawal is special when it comes to the backgrounds of the mothers in the villages. She has suffered many losses during the war which led her to where she is today. In a massacre in her hometown her father, sister, brother in law and two of their children were killed. The remaining four were placed in an SOS family and that is how Mama Nawal got in touch with the organisation.

Mama Nawal had a dream about what her dream of work would be; as a hairdresser. She reached her dream and became a hairdresser, but then the war broke out and she had neither the possibility nor the economical resources to work in that field. To work with the SOS must have been a good way of serving her suffering people, and at the same time have a home of her own where she could feel safe and at peace. Considering her circumstances, and the fact that she loves to raise children, the SOS must have been the perfect job for her. What would she have done except for becoming an SOS mother?

Mama Nawal knows that she has limitations when it comes to going outside of the village to meet her friends a family. She has an entire family to take care of, and she also has her house to look after. This means that she doesn’t get much time over to visit with people on the outside, and her life becomes very much of a routine. The only people that she does have time to meet with are the other mothers within the village which, I think, bothers her a little bit considering the fact that she brought that up on the question of how her life had changed. Was it a freedom of choice and is she happy with how her life has taken shape?

Mama Kristine

Because of Mama Kristine’s pedagogic skills and because of her role as a preparatory mother she is unique. Her background is like none of the other mothers’ backgrounds, and having her must be a tremendous asset. After having taken care of her sick brother Mama Kristine chose to start working with the SOS in order to continue her call, which was to help others in need. Who else could be in more need of her than helpless children?

She says that she passes on the children to their new mothers without any problems. She feels like all of the children living in the village are her own children. Letting go must be hard though, especially when you have devoted so much time to the child or the children. She does see the children every day, but it is never the same as when they used to live with her. I do believe that she has a hard time letting go of the children, but that she keeps it to herself as
much as she can. I do not think that she has personal problems with the new mothers, but
more emotional problems with having to let the children go.

During the six years that Mama Kristine has worked with the SOS she has never felt that the
children aren’t hers. She feels that as long as you are convinced that the child needs you as a
mother, you will thereby feel as the mother of that child.

Mama Kristine had also never expected that there would be children living in the social
misery that they actually were. This became a wake-up-call for her since family was sacred to
her and her own family. That must have been an immense change in her view on life. She
must have had to realise that not everyone was living like her, and that not everyone had a
good upbringing like she had.

Before she got in touch with the SOS Mama Kristine was very egoistic and conceited
according to herself. She also used to look down on people. The wake-up-call that she
experienced when she started with the SOS can be considered to be a foremost mental
introduction to a world of affliction and melancholy. These main changes in her life can be
viewed as a kind of therapy for Mama Jeanne D’arc, because she became a better human
being, and also a better fellow being towards others. The children needed her, and the initial
reason for her being there was to help these children. The arrogance and egoism have
vanished and have been replaced by humbleness and humanity.

Religion to Mama Kristine is how you treat people. She prays and goes to church like a good
Christian, but she also values interaction between people. Religion to her is not a limitation; it
is something that is meant to broaden people’s views. Several factors play important roles in
religion, such as moral, giving and the means of raising children. To her, religion embraces all
aspects of daily life.

Despite the religious belonging of her children, Mama Kristine will always see them as her
own; nothing can change that according to her. It feels like she loves everyone regardless of
background, which is essential for an SOS mother. All are treated equal under her roof.
Mama Fatme

The background that Mama Fatme has gives her the opportunity to work within the SOS without having to be concerned about the financial issue. She comes from a wealthy family, and was in no need for safety or an income when she applied. The love she has for children and her very strong feelings for motherhood made her explore the job as an SOS mother. The fact that she was suited to become a mother was all she needed to know in order to make her decision about undergoing necessary training. She says that she is not there for employment, and that she is convinced of what she is doing.

The children that Mama Fatme is raising are, to her, her own children coming from her. She doesn’t see them in any other way. If she had, she would have considered her role to be an employment, which she doesn’t. She raises them the way she was raised, and the way she wants them to raise their future children.

Motherhood is a big call, which, after she experienced it, changed her life drastically. She can now understand what motherhood is really about, which she couldn’t before. Motherhood requires many qualities from a woman, which emerge when the woman becomes a mother. Her appreciation of mothers is greater now that she actually knows how much they give and sacrifice for their children. She has learned to appreciate herself and her own mother, as well as other mothers.

Knowing that the children need her is a great reason for raising them. The need varies from one child to another, depending on the child’s history. Another reason for continuing to help the children is the pride that Mama Fatme takes in being an SOS mother. The changes that improve the child’s wellbeing and boost the self-esteem feels like a stone lifted off her shoulders. The success is an irreplaceable feeling which is the driving force for continuing the work she is doing.
Conclusions

What made these women get involved with the project?

- The situation of war has surrounded these women early in their lives, at least some of them. Not everyone mentioned the war as a factor, but all of these women have been affected by the war in one way or another. The trauma that some of these women have had to go through has lead them to make decisions out of the situation that they were in at that point in their lives. The fact that they have managed to go on with their lives and do something with it, such as becoming a mother shows strength within them. It is somewhat similar to Antonovsky’s study on the Israeli women and how they had managed to stay healthy despite the experiences they had to endure in the concentration camps.

Maybe that might have affected a decision of working within these villages as mothers? Since the war didn’t give many opportunities of work, and since many children lost their families and the world known to them as home, these women decided to make contact with with the SOS Association to eventually become mothers to these children. Within these villages the women are participating in a great cause, which is helping children in need. They are doing so actively by being mothers and raising the children, which is connected to one of the components for SOC, Meaningfulness.

With all of the destruction and suffering that the war leads to, it might have lead to something good in some cases? Some of these women have found the meaning of their lives as SOS mothers, and in some cases the war was the reason they started working with the SOS; and that, again, leads to the component of meaningfulness.

- Maybe some of these women wanted to have a family of their own, but maybe hadn’t found a suitable partner to give them the family they wanted. Sometimes the families might have wanted to arrange a marriage for these women, who in turn had rejected
that idea. Maybe in some cases the women didn’t want to get married, but they did want a family.

What better way is there to have a family than to become an SOS mother? As the women obtain their wish of a family without a man, the children find the mother that they need and yearn for. Not all informants wanted to share their life stories with me, and were very modest with the background information that I was given during my interviews.

- There are those who were poor, divorced, uneducated, unmarried mothers, or that for some other reason weren’t accepted by the society that they came from. People look down on them for what they have or haven’t done in their past lives, and that might have been hard for those women to cope with. Imagine being excluded from your family, rejected by the society or by the circle of friends. A single woman trying to make it on her own, without a job in Lebanon will have a hard time trying to do so. By working with the SOS villages, the SOS mothers have an income, run a household and raise children without being dependent, and this is maybe one of the few professions where a woman can be a single parent and make it on her own.

In Lebanon, tradition makes the men providers, and leaves the women with salaries that wouldn’t be enough for them to make it through a month. Rumours travel around fast and in a near future these women have nowhere to go. If this could be the case then the SOS Association is a very good place to go to. It provides food, housing and clothing.

In return the women raise children, which might have been something that they have always dreamed of doing. There they know that they will not be judged by the people working there, because of the situation that they are in. All of the mothers have something immense in common; the children they are raising come from miserable backgrounds and are their main focus.
How does it feel to raise children that are not theirs biologically?

Most of the answers that I got to this question were similar to each other. The mothers, in time, start to see the children as their own, and gain the love for them that any mother feels for her child. The unanimous answer, from almost all of the women is that they all see these children as their own. It comes naturally to them because of the close relationships that they develop with the children. The women do everything that a biological mother does for her children. These women love the children like any other woman loves her child, and they completely disregard biological factors. The women grow on the children, as the children grow on the women which are natural processes when a family is as closely linked as the families in these villages are. For that reason biology is but a small detail that is completely unimportant to the entire Association as the concept is to bring together children with a mother that will love them and cherish them for what they are.

What is needed from these women is a sense of comprehensibility for the children and their experiences. They need to understand the experiences that these children have at their arrivals, because they might haunt them for a long time if they are difficult and frightful enough. In order to grasp all that has happened, the SOS mothers need to know how to handle these situations as well, otherwise they will have a difficult time in dealing with the children in question.

How have their views on life changed after starting as an SOS mother?

Altogether it seems to me as if the mothers I have interviewed may not have understood my question when I asked it. I sense that they are not used to these kinds of spiritual questions at all, if even used to visitors like me. Some women changed in their personalities more than anything else. They felt humbled by these children and the heartbreaking pasts that they have had to live through. Many of the women came from somewhat sheltered worlds, in relation to the lack of awareness they had to the situation that many people were in, and still are in today. Many were not ready for the amount of care that some of these children required in order to develop and heal.
Some of the women found their meaning in life, and found what they had been searching for, the missing link in their lives. Being occupied with house chores and raising children filled all their time, and pushed aside the emptiness that was there before.

Having to take care of a home and a family matures a person, and all the women have matured and have learned to handle the situations in one way or another. From not even considering to become a mother with all the responsibilities required, to giving one hundred percent from the beginning.

Independence is something else that the women have had to establish since the children were depending on them. This is, for some, the call of their lives that they had been searching for their entire lives, and which they have found.

Why do they help these children?

- Most of the answers to this question were congruent. The children need these mothers to take care of them and love them; otherwise they wouldn’t have had to be there at all. The orphans and abandoned children do not have anyone to take care of them; and the children with cluttered social backgrounds need a chance to a decent living which they experience through the SOS Association. The mothers see their duties as small compensations for what the children have endured in their short lives; and sacrifice everything they have for the children who need them so much. They feel like they get life back themselves by raising the children.

Again the mothers feel needed; they have a meaning in what they do. They have grown and have learned how to manage and comprehend situations concerning the children they take care of.

How great impact do religions have on their every-day-life?

- During my fieldtrips and interviews with these women I noticed, in some cases more than others, that they were spiritually oriented in their state of mind. One way or
another God or the Virgin Mary have leaded them to where they are today, either through dreams or through a call that they felt they had been chosen for. Many of them refer to God as their guide, and as their protector. All of these women are religious in one way or another, some more and some less. They do not only count religion as prayer or visits to their religious temples of prayer, they see religion as a part of their daily life; through the love, forgiveness and the treatment of their fellow beings. Religion is a part of people’s daily lives, and it embraces everything that they do, both for themselves and to others.

Even though they might not think about it, many of them had several religious icons in their homes. They were pictures, scripts or holy books. It is normal for them to decorate their homes with these religious items, but for someone who might not be familiar with the local customs it might seems as if that family was in fact religious. These women were very thorough with pointing out the difference with being religious and conservative. None of them perceive themselves as being conservative, but they all agree on being religious to different degrees.
Discussion

The gift of motherhood is something that these women appreciate and cherish to an extent. None of the ones that I have chosen to present have been married or engaged. Despite all of them being singles, all of them are mothers, and I think that motherhood is what really matters to them. By becoming SOS mothers, these women never had to look for a husband, get married and then have children; they could still have the same commitment to children.

These women are unaccustomed to the kinds of interviews that I was conducting with them. I believe that the point of view that I was looking for was hard for them to grasp some times. What I meant with “view on life” was more a philosophy of life in a spiritual matter. It appears to me as if they understood the question as a more basic one, in the sense of how their living changed, considering familiar status among other topics. I wish I had been able to get to a deeper level in these discussions with the mothers, but it felt as if they sometimes didn’t want to go there, as if there was a wall between us. I do understand that it might be difficult to discuss a life story with a stranger, who one meets for a short time.

Socioeconomic and sociopsychological factor are contributions to why the mothers have decided to join the Association and devote the rest of their lives to it. These villages are safe havens for the mothers who don’t have to worry about work, supporting their families on the outside, unwanted marriages and so forth. The economy is stable for the mothers since receive monthly allowances from givers in the world. The “work” they perform by being the mothers of children in need is what they get paid for, which in turn relieves them from the pressure of taking care of a household and children while working at the same time.

Spirituality is evident in each of these women’s lives. One way or another all of them have had some kind of interaction with God, according to themselves. God has always been in their lives somehow; be it prayers, going to church every week, receiving a message in a dream or just sensing His presence- they have all experienced God in some way.

Some feel like they get life back by raising these children, they finally see the meaning of their lives. The SOC within these women is very strong indeed, and the component that is most central to SOC, meaningfulness, permeates all of the interviews that I have conducted,
these women now have meaningfulness in their lives, in what they do; and they have also learned to comprehend and manage the situations at hand that occur. The concept of SOC is therefore very accordant to the SOS mothers’ experiences and might even be applied to the concept of The SOS Association of Children’s Villages. The sense of coherence is indeed a global orientation. It does express the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one’s internal and external environments are predictable. There is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected, which has been proves to these women with the children that have started new lives by getting educated, acquiring a job and even getting married. Things do tend to work out for the children, and can be connected to the SOS mothers’ strong SOC which is of utmost importance in order to deal with and take care of the children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is being lived up to by the Lebanese Association of SOS Children’s villages on some of the most important accounts. The articles that I have quoted earlier are the most basic rights of a child, and that right is being given to these children by the SOS Mothers in cooperation with the entire association. I am not sure if the SOS Association has the UN Convention as a fundamental ground to the values that the association advocates, but the values are congruent with each other in many basic ways.

A search for shelter from the outside might be a probable cause for applying to the SOS Association. Not only the mothers, but also the children need shelter from the cold. They are there because of their social situation among other things. It seems as if some of these women chose the SOS as a last alternative since their lives didn’t turn out the way they had pictured them to. Maybe they never found anyone to marry, maybe they wanted to escape from their families, and maybe they are divorcees. They might have chosen the SOS because there was nowhere else to go.

The conclusions that I have drawn are very speculative, but I do tend to see a pattern in how the women get in touch with the SOS Association. The reasons may differ, but the most common reason is the desire to have a family and a house to look after, which they obtain by being mothers. Despite what religion these women belong to, the culture is still the same throughout the country. The ultimate goal for many women there is to run a household and have children; which is precisely what they do in an SOS family except for the fact that she is doing it alone, without a man to help.
## Registry of sources

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### Literature:


Lebanese Association of SOS Children’s Villages Brochures

### Internet:

- [http://www.sos-barnbyar.se](http://www.sos-barnbyar.se), 2006-04-25
Appendix

The following documents are appended this essay:

1. Old list of questions
2. New list of Questions
3. Complete interviews with the informants included in this essay
Old List of questions

The life before SOS Children’s Village
1. What were you doing before you started as an SOS mother?
2. What did your life look like?
3. What was your attitude towards life?
4. What was the meaning with life to you?

The life as an SOS mother
5. How did you first get in touch with the SOS Children’s Village Association?
6. Had you ever heard of them before that?
7. Why did you decide to start working with SOS Children’s Village Association?
8. How has your attitude towards life changed since then?
9. Has it given you a new meaning?
10. Do you consider your role as an SOS mother to be a profession?
11. What has this ”profession” given you as an individual?
12. What kinds of difficulties do you come across?
13. Do you ever regret choosing this ”profession”?
14. Do you have any children of your own? If yes, how many?

The children in SOS Children’s Village
15. Is it difficult to raise the SOS children?
16. What does it feel like to raise children that are not biologically yours?
17. Is it easy for the new coming children to settle in the new family, considering the fact that you are a stranger at first?
18. How do the children’s social backgrounds look like in general? Are they orphans, or do they come from a broken home etc.?
19. How do they get in touch with a Children’s Village, and how do they end up in a family?
20. Have you ever considered quitting as an SOS mother?

Religion in the SOS Children’s Villages
21. Considering the religious plurality within Lebanon, how are the children placed in families?
22. Are, for example, Muslim children placed with a Muslim mother?
23. Is the religion mixed within the families?
24. Are you religious?
25. How great impact does religion have on your everyday life?
New list of Questions

The life before SOS Children’s Village

1. For how long have you been working as a village mother?
2. How many children have you raised?
3. What were you doing before you started as a mother? How did your every day life look like?
4. What was the meaning of life for you? (through an existential perspective, your mission)
5. Before getting in contact with the SOS, what did you want to do with your life? (Did it happen?) Why? How was your attitude towards life?
6. How did you discover the SOS Association? Had you heard of them before?
7. What made you get involved in this project?
8. You had your personal reasons for coming here in the beginning, what changes have you experienced after starting to work with these children? Are you still here for the same reason that you came for?

The life as an SOS mother

9. (Do you have children? How many? Any contact with them?)
10. Going from having no children to being a mother of 3 to 9 has to be mentally, physically and time-consuming. How do you deal with a situation like that?
11. Where does the love for the children come from?
12. How has your view on life changed after starting as an SOS Mother?
13. Have you ever considered quitting as an SOS mother?
14. Do you view your role as a mother as a profession? Have you ever regretted choosing this ”profession”?

The children in SOS Children’s Village

15. Is it difficult to raise these children? What difficulties do you stumble upon?
16. How does it feel to raise children who are not biologically yours?
17. What do you think that you mean to these children?
18. Why do you help these children? What does it give you to help them?
19. Do the children that arrive have a hard time in adjusting to the new situation in the family, considering the fact that you as a mother are a stranger to them in the beginning?
Religion in the SOS Children’s Villages

20. Are you religious?

21. How great impact does religion have on your ever-day-life?
Complete interviews with the informants included in this essay

Mama Sabah

A working mother for 23 years has raised 24 children including current children.

1. Worked as a shop assistant at a clothing store for children.

2. As usual, with my family and a dream of getting married and starting a family of my own. Have always liked social work, since I was younger.

3. Positive attitude- came here in 1983. Despite the Israeli invasion my attitude towards life was positive, since we had been through war before that. I was afraid to start a family because of the war.

4. I love life, it’s beautiful to have a family and it means a lot to me. I worry a lot about family and means of providing for them. I’m the kind that thinks things through a lot before acting on anything, like if I wanted to have a family I would be concerned about whether I and my husband would be able to provide for them, what would happen if one of us passed away. This worry is most probably a result of the war, and being kept away from my family, stuck in the village.

5. I found out about the SOS through an article in a newspaper and liked the idea. I don’t do anything without having thought about it thoroughly, but in this case there was nothing to think about. I called right away, and started instantly. I liked the idea of children, being orphans without a family, being taken care of in a village. Women taking care of the children, becoming their mothers and living with them as a family in a house. It was like a vision or a dream come true. When I finally came here I liked the idea even more.

6. No, had never heard of them before. And knew nothing about SOS until the ad in the newspaper.

7. I liked the idea of mother and children as a family in a home. Not like an orphanage, with one person in charge of each task (teaching, cooking, cleaning), but only one mother and her children. You are not religiously tied here either. The idea suits me well, I like sincerity. One should not limit a child, but give it the opportunity to learn and educate itself. One should also give the child as much as it can take in, and not make them feel like orphans. Of course there are rules within SOS, but not the kind of rules that would choke the child. Important to bring out each child’s personality individually, that’s how SOS works.

8. Not by working with SOS, but sometimes regretting things I have said or done. I sometimes tell myself that I should have acted differently. I do not regret starting to work with SOS as a mother.

9. No.

10. –
11. Nothing is easy or without difficulty. The children themselves are not difficult, but the social circumstances are.

12. First of all I love children- whether my own or not. My brother is married with children and I love my brother’s children. I am able to love them as if they were my own. That is why I was able to work with SOS. When I first started I got a lot of young children. I got a baby that was five days old once and I saw that baby as my own. You can’t say that they are not my children, because they are. The younger the children are, the better you can deal with them. It hurts me when someone asks me those kinds of questions because I love them and they are mine.

13. Within the SOS the world is so wide and I didn’t know that there existed that much pain and suffering, or problems for that matter. Neither did I know that these children were in need of this much care. I was not sure if I could give them all of that either. I am proud of being an SOS mother because I am doing something for these children that not everyone can do.

14. No. I might look at it as a profession through the yearly educational seminars where we get the chance to develop as individuals and as mothers, so through that aspect I might see it as a profession, but not as a profession that I get paid for. When you go to a regular place of work you work a certain amount of hours that you get paid for, but as an SOS mother you “work”, but not for money. Everything that you give is out of love for the children. You can not compare love with the material things. No one can pay for giving life.

15. A lot. It has given me safety and stability, the pride of being an SOS mother, and of course happiness. I am not only proud of me, I am also proud of the four children I have at home at the moment and the total of 24 children that I have been and still am raising. The satisfaction of the grown children’s success in life makes me proud too. We are a big team that work together, so I am proud of all of us.

16. I am aware of the children’s situation in advance, before they come. You get prepared socially and psychologically. Some cases are difficult from a humane point of view; the children are used to a certain living standards that might be very bad. You give them a lot of love, but put up boundaries. I don’t work alone- there is a doctor, a psychologist and a village director (for support). What might be very difficult is if the child that arrives is five or six years old, and then you as the new mother want to set new rules. That will be hard for children that are as conscious of the surroundings and happenings at that age; they won’t necessarily go along with all the rules.

17. The children don’t come to the village right away. The SOS mother visits the child’s/children’s family in advance and the child visits the village, in order to prepare the child for the extensive life changes that he/she is about to go through. The situation is explained to the child, so that it knows why it has to move away from the biological family. Things tend to work out in time as the child doesn’t settle in right away.

18. During the war, the children were mostly orphans and had no one to take care of them. Nowadays the cases are mostly social cases, like divorce (indecision in-between the parents) or the death of a parent, and even in these cases there is no one to take care of
these children. The solidarity has changed because of the economical situation that occurred after the war; no one is able to take care of the children in need, that’s why they come to the villages.

19. There is the office in Sin el Fil, Beirut, and there are advertisements and campaigns about the SOS organisation. Village priests, hospitals or even a mayor might send an application for a child or siblings that they consider in need of the SOS.

20. Never. It is a commitment; you can’t just leave the children and leave them behind. This is your life too, with the children and the other SOS co workers. Ex. If you’re married, you leave the husband, not the children.

21. Christian mothers take Christian children, and Muslim mothers take Muslim children, but this is in general. With exceptions the families are religiously mixed, depending on if there is enough room to take in the children as described. This is for the children’s backgrounds sake, and not for isolation or separation- they just want the children to learn about their original religion. This gives the Christian mother more freedom to teach her children about Christianity, and vice versa for the Muslim mother and Islam. Religious discrimination is strictly forbidden. There are six Christian homes and four Muslim homes in this village.

22. –

23. –

24. I have my faith, but can’t call myself a strict, practicing Christian. I do pray and go to church, but on occasions and not like every Sunday. I have an agreement with God.

25. I feel that there is a lot of love, compassion and forgiveness within the SOS, and I consider all of that to be part of religion. Within the SOS you consider everything as a part of religion. They don’t discriminate, but see the child as an individual and as a human being. We don’t differ between religion, ethnicity or skin colour. All religions preach that you should love thy neighbour.

Mama Maria

Has worked 5 years with the SOS ; 4 years and 3 months as a mother, and has raised 11 children, including current ones.

1. I worked as a teacher for seven years, as a secretary at Caritas, in a clothing store that imported clothes from America; I travelled around dancing dabkéh during the war, so we started to travel abroad and performing; and I have worked in a grocery store.

2. I had a normal life. In my family we were very tight; my father was a minister, a priest. My parents gave us freedom, with responsibility. Our familiar relationship was built on trust, and I have done everything that I have wanted in life without anyone questioning me, thanks to the trust within the family.
3. Optimistic, filled with humour. I believe in God, and that what He wants happens in life. Before coming here I went to Canada but didn’t like it there. I prayed to the Virgin Mary for guidance on what to do with my life, because I never found anyone to sacrifice my freedom for, as in marriage; and I wasn’t interested in marriage either. When I asked the Virgin what to do, God Himself spoke to me, in French; he showed me this village and said that there is where my life begins.

4. Life is beautiful, you go through all stages of life, and nothing is ever too hard. I would never weaken for an obstacle; I would rather use it as a challenge. I was strong.

5. My sister worked here 20 years ago, and told me to try working here, but I was very reluctant and didn’t like the idea very much. Seven years before starting to work here I had the dream where God came to me. When I finally visited the SOS village, I remembered the dream and felt that that really would be the beginning of my life. I felt a strange kind of relief, and I love living here doing what I do.

6. Since my sister was working here, yes. She worked here for five years. What you hear from the outside about SOS is not the same that you see when you live in the village.

7. I really liked it. I came as an intern and found myself at home. Any other kind of work that you might do has a certain limit. At a certain time each day you leave your work and go home, shutting down that part with no feedback. When raising children, on the other hand, you get something good back; which is seeing them grow and prosper.

8. Never, I chose to do this with the conviction of it being my role in life. Whenever there is a rough time, I pray to the Virgin Mary for strength and guidance. There is no other option and it is the best thing a person could do in life!

9. No, I was never married.

10. –

11. Of course it is difficult. It is important to be present for the children, and to practice forgiveness. You also have to understand them, because that is when you accept what the child does with forgiveness, because that child has been through a lot in its previous life.

12. You raise these children 24/7. And I do everything that a regular mother would do with all my love. The feeling of them not being your children disappears with all the things that a mother does. You grow to love them more for each day that passes, and that makes you see them as your own children.

13. I found the meaning in life, and I also found what I was searching for. The sense of emptiness disappeared.

14. No, because if I did I would not succeed. Here, you work with people, not machines. The feelings that are required are among other love and compassion. You need to accept the child for what it is, no matter what. If not, and if you don’t accept the
difficulties that come along, you will not make it here. This line of “work” requires love.

15. It filled my life with a lot of things. I feel important to someone, what I do and what I give is considered to be worth a lot.

16. Our children are difficult; the difficulty is to settle in with the child. A child is ripped away from its family and brought to you, who is not his mother and the child is not your child either. The child does not always accept me, so I have to build my relation with this child; I have to pull child to me and make it feel like it is in a new family, belonging there, away from his old family.

17. You have to be ready to give comfort and take the first step yourself for the child to be able to adjust to its new surroundings. You have to make the child feel really welcome, and be considerate about the child’s state of emotion. I also have to be considerate about feeding, teaching, bathing and dressing the child. Respect is a very important trait that you, as a mother, need to have. Let the child know that it has its own bed, its own closet and so forth, to show the child that it has its own place in the family from the beginning. Some children adjust instantly, while it might take time for others.

18. i) A dead mother.
   ii) Divorce (social cases)
   iii) Unmarried mother

19. There is the office in Sin el Fil, Beirut, and there are advertisements and campaigns about the SOS organisation. Village priests, hospitals or even a mayor might send an application for a child or siblings that they consider in need of the SOS. Someone contacts the office. A social worker conducts an investigation about this child/these children. The SOS mother to be visits the children, and the visit her. Sometimes when an organisation contacts the SOS they can do nothing else than say yes, because of the difficult situation. How the children are placed depends on the space and the separate cases. Some children cannot be placed in a family with other children, and the never separate biological siblings. If the child isn’t in SOS need, they tend to let it stay with its family, helping them to get back on track through monetary aid.

20. No, never! I love what I am doing!

21. Christian mothers take Christian children, and Muslim mothers take Muslim children, but this is in general. With exceptions the families are religiously mixed, depending on if there is enough room to take in the children as described. This is for the children’s backgrounds sake, and not for isolation or separation- they just want the children to learn about their original religion. This gives the Christian mother more freedom to teach her children about Christianity, and vice versa for the Muslim mother and Islam. Religious discrimination is strictly forbidden. If a Christian mother has a Muslim child, an Imam will come and teach that child its religion. Our duty is to help the children and not their religion. Me, as a Christian cannot teach a Muslim child his religion that is why they place a Muslim child with a Muslim mother. If there was no
other outcome than for me to take in a Muslim child, then I would have no problem with it. I have a baby right now that is Muslim.

22. –

23. –

24. Of course. I am not radical, but I do believe in God, I pray at home, and I go to church. As long as a person is away from God, that person will feel sadness. God fills your life with joy.

25. We pray at home- because prayer helps the child to act in good manners. It is even psychological because you find inner peace when praying. It helps your soul grow; just like your body needs to be fed with food, the soul needs to be fed as well.

From now and forward the new list of questions will be the one in use

Mama Layla

1. Approximately 11 years

2. I have raised 14 children

3. I am an educated person. I studied at the university, but didn’t finish my studies. I underwent a secretarial schooling, and got my diploma. I worked as a secretary for almost a year. I then worked in a kindergarten. God then gave me the opportunity to work here.

4. God shows the way, and if you have goals they can only be reached through His guidance. It has a lot to do with conviction; you have to be convinced, if you have any doubts it will be hard to reach these goals. It has a lot to do with giving; when helping others, it is not for your own winnings sake, it has to do with simply giving to others.

5. Of course! I have reached my goal which was working with children despite the location whether kindergarten, or any other organisation. I have been offered a job with a bank, but turned down the job when I found out about the SOS. The separation from the family is difficult. You are forced to give up privacy and become obligated with duties. This is where my life is today, and my future is with these children. When you live with the children you forget about the separation; which becomes meaningless, from your family and start living for these children, who have become your family.

6. I hadn’t heard of the SOS before. They already existed in the first village Bhersaf, and had been there for a very long time. I am originally from the village of Kfarhay and I have been able to obtain necessary information about the SOS. When they started building the SOS village here in Bhersaf I turned down other job offers. We didn’t know that there were any SOS Children’s Villages in Lebanon before they came to Kfarhay.
7. It is a nice thing to do. Motherhood is very important to women in their lives, whether they are a woman's own children or alternative children, giving is important!

8. I have achieved the goals with what I wanted to do and I have reached my personal goal, which was having a family. I have achieved all of this through my conviction. How did you change? I am more active. I wouldn’t have felt this way if I had been doing something different today. It feels good for me to do all these sacrifices for these children. I can’t replace these children with anything else. It feels good for me to say that I am raising the children of the future.

9. No, I was never married.

10. To start with, the mother doesn’t get all of the children at once. She studies every case on its own to begin with, accepts the child and learns to handle the situation. After she has gotten settled in with the first case, she will be ready take on the next child. The already existing children in my family help me out a lot when a child is being introduced, and makes the new children feel welcome and at home. The chores get divided in between the children and me, and everyone take care of their own personal things, whether it concerns cleaning their rooms, making their beds, folding their clothes etc. I teach them all of this on order for them to learn how to cooperate and to build up a sense of responsibility.

11. From my heart and soul of course.

12. Many children are difficult at the beginning. The separation from their old lives and parents is difficult, because you are taking them away from everything that is familiar to them. I don’t carry the whole load of responsibility on my own; I get help from psychologists, pedagogues, and the village director among others. A child might not accept the changes and might not want to stay. You have to win the children over, and if you don’t succeed on your own you can get help from the village director; Johny, from the pedagogue or from the psychologist. In that way you will eventually solve any problems.

13. I feel human emotions. After less than one week with a new child I feel love towards it. I feel like and get them to see me as their mother, and see the family as their family. A mother is a mother, whether biological or not. Being a mother requires love and devotion.

14. Without exaggerating, the children feel that I am their mother, and that this is their family. I am the ideal mother, and that makes them happy.

15. I have become more mature. I have experienced renewal in my life and I have become more independent. Love is always present and shows the way to success. I have a home and a family. My personal/private life has become less important.

16. No, I see this as a call. If I did regret then I would have left a long time ago, and not stayed for 11 years.
17. Seeing their joy, their success, and most importantly, love for their siblings; makes me feel like I have achieved and reached my goal. Why? Because the children need me here. Orphans have been taken from their parents. They need the closeness we give; otherwise they wouldn’t have been here. This is a small compensation for what they have gone through.

18. There are many difficulties in the beginning. You pull out a child of the only thing familiar to it. It is very difficult for a child to adjust to a mother that is not his real mother. The team here at the village helps me out when a new child arrives.

19. No, never.

20. Yes, with the meaning of believing in God.

21. Each mother is united with children from her own religion, which makes things easier the cooperation concerning religion. Each mother gets to teach her own religion, in the best way she knows.
   If I had to take care of a Muslim child, I would take care of it and love it unconditionally, and get help with the religious part. When you live with feeling love for one another, it becomes much easier to express those emotions.

**Mama Linda**

1. 12 years

2. I have raised 15, including the 7 at home.

3. Many different occupations. I worked as a secretary, a nurse; I have worked in a monastery. I studied at an English educational centre. My life was normal. I lived with my family. After work I used to come home and not help around with the chores. I was enjoying life.

4. I saw life as a beautiful gift that needed to be enjoyed. One should leave good traces of oneself for the future.

5. I wasn’t doing what I wanted to do. I didn’t want to become a nurse, but the war left me no other option. We became isolated, and it was the only way out. I come from the southern parts of Lebanon, from the village of Sferai, where the second SOS village is located.
   I believe that God gave us life as a gift, which we have to live. We have to accept both good and bad. Enjoy the good, and learn from the bad. Never get stuck, and always move on.

6. I come from Sferai and had known about the SOS ever since they started building the village up there.

7. –
8. I am still here for the same reasons that I came. The basics are that children (orphans) are in need of care and love.
   I have become more responsible; I take more responsibility and care more about details in people’s lives, which I didn’t do earlier in my life.
   I have become more firm in my decisions than before, which is to other people’s privilege. If I let loose now, the children might get lost. I prioritise the children more than I do my private life.

9. No, I was never married.

10. There is a certain level of responsibility. You start out with 2-3 children. When you eventually are completely settled in with these children, new children come. Your level of responsibility doesn’t diminish, it becomes bigger. Patience is needed, as is the faith in God. You have to be convinced about what you are doing.

11. There has to be love to begin with. What else would there be? You have to live with love in order to give it.

12. Of course it is hard; I am not going to lie to you. There are difficulties in their social life, and with the parents who treat their children very badly. The difficulty in raising these children is that they come from problems and are used to seeing things.

   They have internal issues from having lived hard lives. It takes time to erase the previous life, and the child might refuse to accept the new family.

13. It gives me a greater sense of responsibility. I have a greater fear in failing to raise these children. I also have greater hope for them to succeed in life. The fear and responsibility is towards the children, and not the parents.

14. I think that they love me. They might see me as a helping hand; a friend, helping them to get past their previous lives. I am a source of confidentiality for solving problems. I am sure that they are dependent of me.

15. In general I haven’t changed, but in respect for things I didn’t know existed, you can say that I changed. I have had new experiences, and I learned new things. Life is still a gift, and we need to move on. This is one stop on the track of life; I don’t know what the next stop will be after this. I will not stay here for ever.

16. No. There is a professional aspect, but to see this as a profession will not get you far, you will not succeed. I have never had any regrets. Sometimes, when it all becomes overwhelming, I might ask myself what I want with this. It is a big responsibility, and if you see it as a profession, you might as well work somewhere else and make money.

17. First and foremost, they need someone to help them. Orphans or abandoned children don’t have anyone to take care of them. It gives me joy and keeps me motivated to see these little individuals make it through and succeed, after all the hard work we go through together.

18. It depends. Some come prepared for and are happy to start their new life; they adjust immediately. Some take longer time to adjust.
19. Yes! I was a newcomer back then.

20. Yes. As much as I can.

21. It has a big effect. Who’s ever life it is, prayer is a part of this family’s life. We do discuss many different topics, and what religion allows us to do. I let them know what religion says, and then it is up to them to choose their path.

Mama Nawal

1. 11 years

2. I have raised 17 children, including the 9 I have now.

3. I worked as a seamstress, a hairdresser and as a nurse. I lived with my family. I had an older sister that got married and had children, and helped her raise her children.

4. God created us and gave us life; we are here in order to continue living. If we feel hopeless, it means that we do not obey God. We all go through different situations in life, and I went through the civil war, and it was violent and difficult.

5. I had different jobs, but my main goal was to become a hairdresser, who I did become, but I couldn’t continue. We had to escape because of the war. My father and my sister died during the war. We had no economical resources for me to develop in that line of work. I see life as both beautiful and ugly. When I grew old enough to start living my life, the war began and we suffered from many tragedies at home.

6. It was all through the war. There was a massacre in my hometown. In that massacre my sister, her husband and two of their six children were killed. The four children that survived were taken in by an SOS village, and that is how I got in touch with them and found out about what they did. I do like raising children, which contributed to my starting as an SOS mother.

7. –

8. I am still here for the same reason I came. I wanted to take care of children, and I still do. You still have your family left, and you keep in touch with them. At the same time I am independent here, with a little family of my own. I have learned to be more responsible, and I raised the children well and right. It is so hard for a child with a difficult background to enter society in a successful way, and I learned how to help them succeed with their lives. There are both positive and negative aspects in raising these children. I didn’t know much about my duties, about the things inside of the village. There is a difference between what you hear on the outside and what really exists on the inside of the village. I had my inner emotions, and then there were the things I had to do outwards, that were expected of me. There was also the amount of children to take care of.
9. No, I was never married.

10. You get a big responsibility to take care of, and you have to live up to that responsibility, and carry it with you. You might get a small baby, or a 14-year-old. With the different ages of the children come different responsibilities, and you have to maintain the responsibilities despite age. You have to sacrifice a lot. I was more motivated at the beginning when I first started, with the age that motivation fades.

11. From God. In how you treat one another. You are constantly with them, which creates love and affection, it also give continuity.

12. Yes it is difficult, and there are difficulties when it comes to both teenagers and babies. Small children need constant care, and you even have to watch them during the night, while teenagers go through different stages where they aren’t too sure of what is happening with them, and might need support and someone to talk to. You have to be organised and disciplined to be able to have structure and balance, otherwise everything will become much more tough and chaotic for both mother and child.

13. The children don’t have anyone to take care of them, and they know that I am not their mother. Some do have a family, but the ones without a family become more attached. I am not acting out feelings; I give everything I can for them and to them. A biological mother might not even give as much as I do.

14. I feel how the children appreciate me for giving them all I have. They do have their own parents, but the can see all the sacrifices I make for them. When I am on my monthly leave the children feel the difference between me and the replacement aunt; and that is when you notice how attached we really are to each other.

15. Your life here becomes routine, with a home and children to take care of. I stay here most of my time, and I either lose contact, or don’t have time with my friends outside of the village. You get used to the people here and spend all your free time here; you rarely see your family on the outside. There are no real opportunities to make new contacts. I feel that I have a big responsibility towards the children. And you feel like you have been both parents to each child when the time comes for them to move.

16. No. Sometimes, when you get angry and emotionally tired you want to get away and you ask yourself why God brought you here. I am doing something good, and I came here on my own, no one forced me. I can not deny that it is a hard task to raise children, but I am not alone. There are people that help me, like the management. You don’t bare all responsibility alone, and that is an assurance.

17. It gives me life. I am responsible for them, I raise these children. This is asked for by me, since I have sacrificed everything for them, because of the tragedies that the children have lived through when they come here.

18. The child is well prepared, it doesn’t come right away. The social assistant goes to see the child’s family, and conducts an investigation to see if there really is a need for the child to be removed. The SOS mother then visits the child and its family, as the child visits the mother in her home for a preparatory purpose. They do refuse you at first.
19. No, not so far. I have an old mother that lives alone. I carry all responsibilities for her and for my children, but I can’t just get up and leave them to go see her whenever I want to. I get stuck in the middle. It is natural for a biological mother to get angry with her children when they are arguing, but she doesn’t leave them for that reason.

20. I am not a conservative Christian, but I do believe in God. Of course I teach the children about their faith.

21. When there is a holiday, either Christian or Muslim, we bring a priest or an imam to mass for us. We also pray every day at home before eating; thanking God for everything He has given us. There is a special prayer for the SOS Association, which is not related to any religion. That means that everyone prays before eating, regardless of their faith. The month of May is the month of the Virgin Mary, and I have prayed everyday of that month.

Mama Fatme

1. Four months.

2. I have six children at the moment, and three are on the way.

3. I studied Arabic philosophy at the university. I lived a regular life with my family. My uncles live nearby too. I woke up in the morning, and my mother had made breakfast. After breakfast I did my chores, and then I would spend the rest of my days reading or watching television, or even visiting my uncles. I didn’t start working after I finished studying at the university, and I sat at home for five years.

4. I wasn’t thinking of anything special, I had no goals for my future. We were a wealthy family and there was no need for me to work. I was very comfortable with my situation.

5. I had applied for jobs at schools, as I had applied to the SOS. I got an answer from school the same day that I got an acceptance from the SOS. I accepted the SOS offer and turned down the offer from the school.

6. I went to their centre in Tamnine (where I come from) after my brother had seen their advertisement on a billboard. He was the one that gave me the idea of working with the SOS and told me to apply. I was given a magazine about the SOS, and asked all the questions that I needed to know in terms of what it would require of me as being a mother and so on.

7. I love children. I asked what it would take of me and under what conditions they would let me work and found that I did have what it took; I would fit as a mother. I have very strong feelings for motherhood, and for being a mother. Jeanne D’arc helped me, encouraged me, and taught me about the values when I got accepted as an
I am an affectionate person and I love children. I am convinced of what I am doing and I am not here for an employment.

8. I had no personal reasons for coming; I just didn’t want to waste my time at home doing nothing, just sitting around. I also wanted to pass on everything I had learned.

9. –

10. I got six children when I first started. I divide my time every day; I cook and clean in the morning; if I need to then I go shopping for groceries, and sometimes I visit someone in the morning. My top priorities are cleaning and cooking for my children, and if there is time left after that then I might go and visit my neighbour. In the afternoon the children come back from school, we have lunch; I take care of the children’s hygiene, and help them with their homework and studies. We don’t go anywhere in the afternoon or in the evening, I only spend time with my children at home; even if I was invited somewhere. That is how things are done at my family home, my mother taught us to live like that.

11. It comes from my heart!

12. That is up to each person, depending on what kind of person you are. There has to be peace and quiet in the surroundings. If there is a problem, the mother should sit the child down, and try to talk everything through and work things out in a grown manner. You have to be open minded, and let the children feel like they can talk with you and communicate with you. Screaming and shouting creates chaos, so the mother has to be calm around the children.

13. I don’t see it that way, because otherwise I would see this as a job in the field of raising children. I see these children as my own, as if they came from me. I raise them the way that I was raised, and the way that I want them to raise their future children.

14. I am an exchange mother, an exchange for heir real mothers. They don’t see me as an authority, but more as a reference to them. They see me as their mother and as a person they can confide in. Here I am teaching them everything, because in the future they will go out to society, and mix with people, communicate with people. We are already showing them a small part of outer society, by taking them shopping with us, and by putting them in regular schools where they get to interact with children outside the village. This is to show them what they might expect from their future lives.

15. It has changed a lot. Motherhood is big, a big call; and I can now understand what it is really about. It requires a lot of effort, patience and a very big heart. I can now feel how much a mother gives, and how much we should give her back. I have learned how to appreciate mothers.

16. No, no, no! Never! I have never seen this as a job; I am not in need of the salary, because my family is pretty wealthy. I have never regretted this, otherwise I would have quit while being on my period of internship. Back then we lived in a very small apartment, and that was both hard and cramped.
17. Because they need us, otherwise they wouldn’t have come here in the first place. I have to give them as much as they need; it all depends on the need. Some children need you more than others do. I feel proud of myself for helping these children. When I see the improving changes of the children and how they start to feel good and have gotten over their sufferings, then that feels like a massive stone has been lifted off my shoulders.

18. Before we receive children, we make sure that they are prepared for and know where they are going. We also prepare the already existing children that they will have new siblings. We buy new clothes for the children, prepare their beds and prepare a lot of love for them. We make sure that both the old and new coming children are a part of the arrival. If a new comer is a very young child, we let the older kids play with a neighbour’s child, in order for them to get used to the new child in advance. When the new children arrive we talk to them lovingly, make them feel comfortable and at home. Everyone around us call me mama Zainab, so that the child will get used to doing that too. Both me and the siblings take care of the new children, we hug them a lot and show them affection. With us doing that they will eventually settle in to their new atmosphere. I never force a child to call me mother because I feel that it has to come from the heart. I used to be an aunt to my children at first, and they would call me aunt Zainab; now they call me mama.

19. No because I came here to become a mother, not to stay as an aunt.

20. My religion is for me. Religion is about how you treat others and how you act around others. Not everyone belong to my religion, and I would never force anyone to become a Muslim.

21. Four of my children go to a Muslim school. We are not conservative; we pray, and say the SOS prayer before eating and sleeping.

Mama Kristine

Kristine is not a regular mother in the SOS, she takes in the new arriving children, and prepares them mentally for the life they will eventually lead with their mother and siblings.

1. Two years

2. I have raised eight children, and I have three on the way.

3. I was a nun and I had been a nun since I was 13 years of age, I belonged to the Jesuit order. I used to work in the southern part of Lebanon, in the village of Sferai, but in the office. I was the secretary of the director; I was responsible for the school education since I am considered to be a pedagogue. I was also responsible of the international donators. I also tutored the children with difficulties in learning. I rarely went outside the villages for visits because I felt that I was needed in the village, and I wanted to devote my time to the children. Before that I was educated in France, in pedagogies and methodology.
We lived in a town called Tamnine where we had a temporary home before we came to this village. In that centre I started raising five children that were Muslims, and I am a Christian mother. I then knew that I was going to turn them over to a Muslim mother as soon as she would have fulfilled her internship and become ready to be a mother. Later I received another two children to that temporary home, so they became seven. At that time the mother-to-be came and stayed with me and the children for approximately a year in order for her to learn how to take care of these children and to get settled into the environment. When we saw that she had settled in to her role and was capable as a mother, and the children had settled in with her; I started to go on the leaves of absence and leave her alone with the children so that they would get used to each other. We all came to this village in February, but stayed together until my house was finished. We also did that so that the children wouldn’t feel ripped away from me instantly, but so that they would get used to their life to come with the new mother. I started letting go of those children slowly, and it was very peaceful without arguments on whose children they were. As an SOS mother you have to be open, stand close to the child and I noticed that there was no difference in how I raised the children and how she raised them. I felt that she continued what I had started with these children. While I was handing over the children, the whole administration was supporting us so that she would feel comfortable and supported in taking on these children. While I was staying with that mother I got the baby Raja who was 24 days old. The children felt that they had a new mother, but that Raja still was their sister, because we make the children feel that they are all siblings despite their backgrounds. That brings the children closer to each other, and they feel brotherly love for each other.

After a month I moved into my new house, and the children came to help me settle in. I inaugurated the house with Raja and a 12-year old boy. Everyone from the village then came and congratulated me, and I appreciated that a lot because of the common participation.

4. I heard my call to become a nun when I was still in my mother’s womb, God called upon me and told me that my call was to give a lot of love. He told me that my duty wasn’t only prayer; he wanted me to devote all of me to others in need. The meaning of my life was to give and give and give without any limit. I was meant to give to everyone, from a small child to an adult. I am not only a mother, I want to give everything; if the director calls and tells me that we have a lot of work to finish, I would do everything I could to help him finish. When I see my child smiling and being at peace - I have a daughter who always smiles- that makes me feel good.

5. I used to be a nun when I suffered from a family tragedy and had to leave the monastery. My father passed away, leaving behind my brother who has Polio. I had to leave the monastery to take on my fathers’ role as the caretaker of my brother. Despite all that happened I continued giving and continued my call. That is why I chose the SOS, because I wanted to continue my call like I used to. While I was living abroad as a nun, my responsibility was the education of the children, and helping them. My role was to help the children reach the goals they have set. I saw my call as a mother in the SOS while I was working in Sferai and saw that as a big challenge. It felt higher to be a mother than to be a pedagogue sitting between four walls day in and out. So I left all of that behind and started my education towards becoming a mother. I completely surprised everyone when I took the decision of becoming a mother. I thank God each day for giving me the strength to perform all of my four duties while I was working in the office, not depending on anyone else.
6. I have known that they exist for a very long time. When I was a nun in Bikfaya, I used to bring children in the schools to the SOS village, so that all the children could meet. The previous national director was a Jesuit nun as well.

7. I felt my call was here, and I liked it. I am able to help these new coming children because I help them on all levels necessary, even though the children don’t come from you, you will still be there for them. When I pass them over to a new mother I don’t feel any problems with that because all of the children in the village are my children according to me. I see the SOS as the body, and we are the organs. We help each other and give each other. The children are the dough, and we form them into beautiful shapes of bread. When they are finished you feel pleased over the results.

8. I came to a point where I started feeling that the blood that is pumped through my veins is SOS blood. I am not an employee, I am living with my family. This mother left her children with me in my house today, and I would never tell her that I don’t want to. Those are my children, as I feel that all the children in the SOS are my children. I am continuing my call, and it has become greater and more serene. The orphan is in his situation because of fait, life has its ways. While I am giving this orphan my time, my joy, my love, my peace, I feel that I am continuing my call. Not everyone can be in the SOS.

9. -

10. You don’t become a mother in an instant. First you do your internship with other mothers where you learn how things work. You later apply what you felt was good on your own family, and you reject the not so good. The administrative office investigates the trainee to see if she has what it takes to become a mother. When I say administration I mean the director of the village and the social assistant. After two years of internship both the trainee and the administration will know if the trainee is fit to take on such a big responsibility or not, because you don’t want to make a child an orphan twice.

Each month a mother gets four days of vacation, where she is allowed to leave the village and visit her family. In those four days the mother can relax and rest and spend time with her family and friends. A mother is never completely shut out of society, the visitors that come always feel like a part of the family and not like strangers. Our children are even introduced to our parents, and we see how our parents start to love our children. My mother calls me regularly and asks me about Raja, and if I am feeding her enough or not.

11. I like this question. When the child arrives, you can’t just completely reject the child’s personality, you need to have respect for the child and its family. You shouldn’t have any expectations but love the child unconditionally. I even have to respect the old life that the child comes from, with that approach comes the love for the child. The daily life that you lead with the children creates love. If the child sees that not only you, but everyone in its surroundings loves it, then that child will start to feel love in return. Throughout all of the child’s moods I stay by its side; whether it is happy or sad. The way you treat a child has to do with love. One is supposed to do it with love at heart. When a child has succeeded in something, I really feel and share the joy, and that comes from my heart. I believe that when you see to all the children’s
needs; dressing, feeding, cleaning, tutoring, loving; and then you teach that child how to be happy in his life. Anyone can raise a child, but it is the way you do it that really matters.

I want to share an experience with you, this story is from the time when we were still living in the temporary home. A little girl came to live with us, and she had Jaundice. She was six years old and there was a chance for me to catch Jaundice from her. I didn’t pay attention to that possibility and took care of her despite the warnings. I made everything for, I cooked her personal food, dressed her alone, fed her alone, bathed her alone. When she would go into the bathroom I would look after her and clean after her. I see all of these duties as acts of love. I thank God that none of her siblings were infect because I took good care of her. I never made her feel isolated because I stayed by her side always. When she got better we told everyone living with us, and we threw her a party for being healthy again. When she was sick I never thought of taking her to a hospital, I wanted to take care of her with my own hands, and I was never afraid.

12. When a child arrives it carries a lot of burdens with it, some are: customs and their use, and behaviour. These children are not used to our customs here at the village. They will have difficulties in adjusting to our environment, which takes time. To follow up on them takes time and patience. For a child to be able to adjust it needs to feel the fellowship, the child needs to feel that it belongs to the household. It gets the most difficult when a child has been on a visit to its parents, because then you have to start all over with certain customs. I don’t agree on removing the child's old personality, I tell the child about his parents and I want the children to keep the good traits. The negative traits that might be harmful for the child’s own safety are the ones that we try to change into something better. A baby is not very difficult to raise, because it is still young and hasn’t started to form just yet. A baby is easier to shape than a child of six years for example. I have succeeded with my life, because I refused to fail. In the beginning I was worried and afraid that I wouldn’t be able to love and take care of a baby, but I have done well in this experience. As you can see she talks and laughs and is a happy baby. The responsibilities of a mother are not just the children; she has to take care of the house, which means cooking and cleaning. You just have to be balanced and organised because all of that reflects on the children. My 12-year old Ahmad is very good at organising his time. Two days ago Ahmad had decided to play in the morning and study in the afternoon. When the afternoon came, all the children were playing, but Ahmad came back home and told me that he had to start studying, all on his own. When he finished with his homework he went back out to play.

13. I have been with the SOS for six years, and through all these years I have never felt that these children aren’t mine. From my point of view it is all about conviction; you have to be convinced that the child who is coming to you needs you as its mother. My children need me; they need me to be loving, understanding, friendly and warm. I am also convinced that a mother has to work on herself too and develop. The benefit from developing would be instead of feeling empty from all of the giving, a mother will feel improved. SOS works a lot on developing the mothers. They ask us mothers what areas we feel that we need to develop in. At this point in time the Internet is developing and becoming more frequent, so we have to develop and acquire some knowledge in that area in order for us to communicate with and understand the children. These children are from another generation, and another age which we have
to follow. You can’t go back to raising your children the way you were raised because it isn’t suitable.

14. I have always been a friend, but at the same time I am the mother. The first group of children that I had called me mama Koko. I was never the obeyed mother with a halo over my head; I was Koko, their friend. Each range in age got its own rights served, and they were all treated accordingly and with justice for all. I created the kinds of relationships where the children could come and confide in me, whichever state of mind they were in; where as I could lead them in the right path. When I live with my children I don’t just consider myself to be their teacher or the person that raises them, I am also their guardian.

If anything happens to my son, or if anyone says something to him, I react by crying. Because this is my son, and I don’t want anyone to make him sad. I feel like the children’s lawyer, and I am known as the children’s lawyer by everyone in the village. I am nice to every child’s family when they come to visit, and I always give them the space and respect that the family needs. I take good care of the visitors, and the children appreciate that a lot and it makes them appreciate me even more.

15. I never expected that there were children living under these conditions. In my family, family itself was considered sacred. I used to be very egoistic and conceited, and looked down on people. When I came to the SOS I changed my view of the human being and had to step down from my pedestal. I felt that you shouldn’t bully anyone. I started devoting all of my time to these children, and left no time for myself. When you are devoting your time to others, you no longer become first priority.

I have changed since I came to Ksarnaba. I have become more open minded and love all the children even more. I like the constant strive forward. All of this didn’t come right away; I have worked on myself for a very long time.

16. Since I started working with the SOS as a mother I haven’t regretted it a single day. From working in the office to becoming an SOS mother is just my completing my call. I feel that I am reaching my goal.

17. A child needs to feel good, it needs to feel clean. A child needs to know how to eat properly and how to act properly in a gathering. If all of that happens, then he will see his society from a new point, and that child will start to like the society he belong to. When the parents come to visit, they are surprised by their children; they don’t believe that those are their own children. They feel that the children are on a completely different level. These children are the future of Lebanon, this is a responsibility. When I see how a mother comes and continues my work that I started with the children, I am happy to see the results. I am not doing all of this because I studied abroad or because I was a nun, I saw how my mother treated my siblings at home. Even when I was in my mother’s womb I could hear her talking to my siblings. When I deal with a child, I do not yell and I do not hit, that language is not a part of me. If a child fell we ask why he fell, if he did something wrong we ask him why he did something wrong. This is a human being that understands if you speak with him. He comes from a totally different environment, and I can’t bring him in to my environment, we have to meet halfway. I always see the glass as half full, not half empty. They see me as the children’s lawyer, because I always look to a child's qualities, both good and bad.

18. -
19. Since I have never regretted doing this I haven’t ever considered quitting or leaving either.

20. Religion is how you treat each other. I do pray and I go to church. I don’t allow my religion to be limited, as saying that I am Christian that is final. When I am truly a believer, and love my religion, then my eyes should open up to all religions. My religion helps me in knowing my God. Within religion there are several factors that exist, such as moral, giving, and the means of raising children. I take help from the bible, but not by saying that Jesus did this or said that. If I really love our Lord, with all of the values I have learned from religion, I don’t necessarily tell them where these values are from. When I am raising a Muslim child I don’t make him feel like he is not part of my religion, I raise them according to what I see fits. I do respect all religions, and when there is a Muslim holiday, I work just as much with the preparations as a Muslim mother would, if not even more. I can call myself religious, but I am not conservative. I have great respect for other religions, and this is because I am so secure in my own religion.