

## **SITAN REPORT – KUWAIT (SUMMARY)**

The report was written by the Higher Council for the Child and the Family. It is dated 2003. It was summarized by the UNICEF Regional Office in Amman.

### **General Background:**

Kuwait's constitution was adopted in 1962 and established the family as its society's main component. The constitution states that the government will nurture the country's youth and protect them from abuse and neglect; that education is a right guaranteed by the state and is free and compulsory in its early stages and that society should take appropriate plans to eradicate illiteracy. It states that the state should care for the physical, moral and mental development of its youth; and that it is committed to healthcare and to preventing and treating illnesses. Within this framework and in recognition of the 10 principles of the 1959 World Proclamation on Children's Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which Kuwait signed in 1991, Kuwait has issued laws and taken actions, which have resulted in surpassing all targets regarding the education, health and social care of children. It complies with all the articles of the CRC. There is no child labor, no children outside the education system and no social deprivation. Kuwait has a Higher Committee for the Family and the Child.

The Economy: The state relies on oil as a main source of revenue (88.7%) and public spending is the main economic motivator. The private sector has little or no involvement in the development process despite the fact that all indicators show that human development is the key to maintaining current standards of living. The government is beginning to face budget deficits as it continues to employ citizens and tries to maintain the current high standards of living. However, it is attempting to correct the situation through economic reforms based mainly on the philosophy that its human resource is its most important resource.

The Population: In 2001, the population growth rate in Kuwait was 3.5% - down slightly from 3.6% in 2000. The decrease is attributed to higher standards of living, increased awareness and higher levels of education. Kuwaitis constituted 38.1% of the total population of almost 2.25 million people. The male/female ratio was normal (49.3% and 50.7%). However, it was 67.3% and 32.7% for the population of guest workers. 80% of jobs are occupied by foreigners. The presence of foreign workers has led to a social imbalance. 52.8% of the population is under 19. 42.8% of the population is aged 20-59. 4.4% of the population is over 60.

Employment Issues: In view of the large number of graduates, there are limited job opportunities for Kuwaiti youths. Kuwaitis form 19.6% of the workforce with 96% of those working in government jobs i.e. unproductive.

Expenditure: Education expenditure constituted 15.3% of total spending in 1999/2000. Higher education expenditure constituted one third of the education budget. Health expenditure constituted around 7% of total expenditure. Social expenditure constituted 19.9% of total expenditure and consists mainly of helping people who are ill or handicapped and women who are widowed, divorced, orphaned or single. It also includes charity projects as well as helping young orphans and needy families.

The Environment: The General Council for the Environment was established in 1995 to monitor and safeguard the environment. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait left its mark on the country especially on its environment. There are 2.5 million mines. Mines killed nine children aged 3-15 and injured 76. Oil wells were deliberately set on fire causing air pollution, oil lakes and oil to leak into the sea. Large numbers of fish have died especially in the summer of 2001 and, although the exact reasons

for this are not yet clear, this is an indication of how polluted the sea around Kuwait has become. Shipping and sewage pouring into the sea are also causing pollution. The capacity of sewage treatment plants is not sufficient and industrial waste is not treated at all. The country relies on desalinization for its water requirements. This affects the environment. Construction is encroaching on the desert and draught is an issue. Draught is exacerbated by the movement of heavy vehicles and is affecting the soil. There are studies showing the effects of the deteriorating environment on the health of the population especially children. However, there is also greater awareness especially as a result of the school environment awareness program.

### **Social Issues:**

**Women:** Kuwait is a democratic country and its citizens have full rights. Women, however, according to the election law, do not have the right to vote although there is nothing in the constitution to this effect. Attempts were made to pass a law giving them the vote but these failed in parliament. The failure was considered a severe set back for women's rights in the country. Women have always played an important role especially when their husbands were away on long diving or trade trips. Women also have equal education and job opportunity rights. Certain indicators show the importance of women's role in society: 73.5% of male government employees have only the secondary education certificate as opposed to only 39% of women; Kuwaiti women constitute 65% of all working women while Kuwaiti men constitute only 15% of all working men; women are better educated especially where higher education is concerned; 22% of women have the secondary education certificate as opposed to only 13% of men; dropout rates are 3% for boys and 1.2% for girls; and females constitute 70% of university students.

**Freedoms and Services:** There are no political prisoners. There is freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Kuwaitis also enjoy free health and education. Other services like water, electricity and fuel are provided at low prices. There is a housing policy and government jobs are guaranteed for Kuwaiti nationals. Benefits for jobseekers have been made available recently. The state is trying to get the private sector to employ Kuwaiti graduates. Pension benefits are guaranteed. The government also provides assistance to needy families.

**Social Problems:** The main social issue in Kuwait is the high rate of divorce and its effect on children. Smoking and its effects as well as certain anti-social behavior problems are also issues as are the increase in consumerism, dropout rates (especially among boys) and high traffic accident rates.

### **Children's Rights:**

The *Sharia* calls for equality, love, peace and brotherhood. The Kuwaiti Constitution and Kuwaiti Laws, therefore, help to promote these feelings among children. The Personal Status Law Number 51 issued in 1984 (including section 347) relies on *Sharia* Law. Every person born in Kuwait to unknown parents has the right to Kuwaiti nationality. Also, Kuwaiti women who divorce their foreign husbands or whose foreign husbands die can give Kuwaiti nationality to their children if the children are under the age of consent. Kuwaiti children enjoy full rights to health and mental and physical development as shown by the services the government offers (preventative healthcare, treatment of illnesses and monitoring of standards of food and medicines) and by the government's housing policy as well as by its educational, media and entertainment programs. The Kuwaiti government offers housing benefits to all its citizens in the form of government housing or finance for building. The high standards of living in Kuwait ensure that all children have sufficient food.

**People with Special Needs:** The government has provided the necessary care homes and schools for the handicapped including rehabilitation care and equipment; and physiotherapy. There are schools

for the deaf and hard of hearing, schools for the blind and partially sighted, schools for the physically handicapped and schools for the mentally handicapped. There are special programs for children with Down's Syndrome. There is a special center for autistic children and special programs for children with learning difficulties. The government has set up a special committee to advise on appropriate legal and technical solutions related to issues the handicapped face. A law governing the care of the handicapped was issued in 1981. The Kuwaiti Handicapped Society (a charitable society) also offers services to the handicapped. There is increased awareness about the issues they face. The 1996 Study on Family Health indicated that 10% of surveyed children (boys and girls) under 15 were handicapped and that 16% of males and 6% of females aged 15-19 were handicapped. Amongst the under 15s, the study showed that 33% had mental disabilities while 27% had physical disabilities.

Children Who Have Lost Their Primary Carers: In addition to the handicapped, the government also provides the necessary care for orphans or children whose parents are unknown and helps children of martyrs and children from broken homes as well as the families of prisoners and the disappeared. The care of children whose parents are unknown (there were 672 boys and girls like this in 2000) includes giving them names and, in 19 cases in 2000, Kuwaiti nationality. The government also tries to find families willing to take them in and care for them according to *Sharia* Law. The care of children of martyrs is run by the Martyr's Office, which was set up in 1996. The need for such an office became apparent after the liberation of Kuwait. It, with the help of the appropriate government departments, offers healthcare, housing, entertainment, social participation and social integration (education, scholarships, legal aid, psychological help and religious guidance). The government also provides various homes and centers for dealing with juvenile delinquents. Kuwaiti laws on juvenile delinquents are in line with CRC Articles. A committee has been set up to further study the issue and modernize the care of delinquents. The help offered by the Medical Rehabilitation Center set up in 1992 to children living in difficult circumstances includes: daily care (food, clothes, sports equipment, cleanliness, daily pocket money and entertainment); healthcare including preventative and curative; social guidance; educational guidance; psychological care; career advice and cultural activities. The Center offers different types of care: full care for children whose families are simply not capable of taking care of them (in the case of some handicapped children or potential delinquents) or for delinquents who are serving out their sentences; day care for some handicapped children or for children with some learning difficulties who would benefit from spending time at the center; home care whereby a social worker visits the child's home regularly to offer guidance and advice and to monitor the child's situation; follow up care once a child returns to his/her family; and fostering for children whose parents are unknown.

Social Services: In addition, the government offers social services through its Social Development Centers (there were 12 such centers at the end of 2000), the first of which was established in 1988. These centers aim to strengthen family ties and relationships and help in solving problems arising from parental fighting or divorce. They also aim to train women and help them sell their produce and help families cope with handicapped children.

It is hard in developing countries to guarantee a child's right to be raised in a caring, loving and understanding environment due to large families, no family planning, busy parents, illiteracy and other economic, social and political factors. However, this has been taken into account in all of the 5-year development plans in Kuwait.

### **Education:**

The right to compulsory education has been achieved in Kuwait. Education is free and compulsory for all Kuwaiti children (male and female) aged 6 (the start of primary education) to 14 (the end of preparatory education). The state is committed to providing school buildings, schoolbooks, teachers

and everything else necessary for this. Capacity levels in the preparatory school system are 96.4% (male and female). The Compulsory Education Law of 1965 obliges parents to send their children to school and fines those who don't. There are calls to raise the school-leaving age from 14 to 16. Illiteracy levels have been reduced to 4% for males and 12.5% for females. The percentage of GDP spending on education increased by 10% between 1997/1998 and 1999/2000. In 1999/2000, there were 149 kindergartens with 1,466 classes attended by 20,896 children. The numbers of children attending kindergartens are increasing. There is no differentiation between boys and girls. There are various private schools in Kuwait set up especially to cater for certain nationalities and minorities.

### **Health:**

There are no specific laws governing children's health issues. However, the general health laws of the country cover them. 7% of the government's general budget is spent on health with 5% of this spent on preventative health and the environment; 54% is spent on primary healthcare and general hospitals; and 41% is spent on specialist centers and specialist hospitals. There are 15 general and specialist hospitals, 71 healthcare centers (25 for maternal and child care), 65 children clinics and 22 preventative health centers. There are also some private hospitals. Child and maternal health care falls within the primary health care and general hospitals category. Health centers provide immunizations, treatment, diagnosis, medicines, follow up and the services of what are known as the clinics for healthy children. 26 of them provide pre-natal and post-natal care and some provide specialist gynecological and delivery care under the supervision of doctors from the general hospitals. On the second level, children can go to the hospital in their area where there is a specialist children's department. On the third level are the specialist hospitals and centers in the Al Sabah Medical City which provide bone surgery, nerve surgery, children's surgery, treatment for hereditary diseases (including pre-delivery tests for pregnant women), etc, etc. Care is taken to ensure that no contagious illnesses are caught in hospitals especially in neo-natal units, children's wards and children's ICU departments. Plans are underway to establish a children's specialist hospital in the City. There is a children's health register system in all three levels of care and the government is working on improving and modernizing it so that it can provide up to date figures and statistics. The government also has an active health awareness program for family health in general and children's health in particular. It has "A Society's Health" program that includes healthy cities awareness and accident prevention awareness among other things. It also encourages health studies. Health services are of a high standard, easily available and accessible to all.

Mortality Rates: Infant mortality rates in 2000 were 8.8 per 1,000 live births for Kuwaitis and 9.1 per 1,000 live births for non-Kuwaitis. These are below the WHO targets for 2000. Delivery death rates are 9.6 per 1,000 live births (0 for Kuwaitis and 26 for non-Kuwaitis).

Maternal Care: The 1996 study on the Health of the Family showed that 75% of pregnant women were seen within 30 minutes of arriving at the clinics while 50% were seen within 15 minutes. The study showed some differences among the regions and among women of various levels of education *vis à vis* whether or not they visit the clinics and the number of visits they make to them. The majority of pregnancy services are provided through government health facilities (38% through government hospitals and 32% through government clinics). 33% of women are anemic during pregnancy. 51% of women take iron during pregnancy, 55% take vitamins while 14% take other medicines. This indicator was clearer among younger women and women with higher levels of education. 88% of women were satisfied with the services they were provided with. 98% of deliveries in the three years preceding the study took place in a health facility. Postnatal care is provided in the maternal and delivery departments of the general hospitals belonging to the Ministry of Health as well as in the maternity hospital. Postnatal care on leaving hospital is provided by the health centers. Only 34% of women avail themselves of these services. Rates vary according to region and are higher for university graduates (46%) than for high school graduates (39%) and

illiterate women (37%). The law allows for the care of pregnant female prisoners. As per the 1996 study on Family Health, the total fertility rate for Kuwaiti women in the mid 1990s was 4 children. This varies from region to region (3 in the capital and between 4.1-4.7 in other governorates) and is lower the more educated a woman is. 38% of the women surveyed had 5 children or more. Of these, 55% had finished primary school, 25% had finished secondary school and 17% were university graduates. 25% of women in their 30s had their first baby before they were 20. This went down to 12.5% for women aged 20-24. The average age at which a woman has her first child has risen with the rise in the level of women's education. Birth intervals for 1 out of every 6 births were 18 months; 36% of birth intervals were 24 months; while 29% of birth intervals were 3 years or more. The median was 29 months. In general, women are expected to have had 1 child at 25 and 2.1 children at 30. 30% of children are born during a woman's high-risk years (15-19 and 35-49). 77% of children are breastfed for, on average, 5.3 months. 4.5% of children were breastfed within the first hour after their birth while 86% were given a bottle. 21.4% of children between 12-15 months and 8.8% of children between 20-23 months continued to be breastfed.

The Home: On average, there are 0.9 people per room in Kuwait and 1.6 people per bedroom. More than 99% of homes surveyed had electricity and 99.7% had running water and were connected to the sewage system. Almost all families had electrical appliances like colored TVs, radios, ovens, air conditioners and automatic washing machines. Rubbish is collected daily from 96.6% of homes surveyed.

Immunizations: These are provided free for children against contagious diseases at 62 primary health centers. The Ministry of Health has an immunization committee that sets standards and policies and co-ordinates the work. The school health program also has immunization promotion campaigns. Immunization rates for the triple vaccine and for polio were 100% in 2000. Immunization rates for measles were 96.9% in 2000.

### **Culture and Entertainment:**

The right to entertainment has been achieved in Kuwait. The Department for Women and Children at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Culture forms part of the Ministry's Social Development and Co-operation Section. It runs children's clubs (employs and trains the clubs' workers); supervises kindergartens and nurseries (ensures that there are sufficient numbers of employees); enables children to express themselves through various activities especially writing and drawing and to learn about other cultures through libraries. It also educates mothers who are club members on everything related to families and children and works on everything that could help a child's development and use his/her spare time in activities that are beneficial and entertaining.

TV and Radio in Kuwait broadcast programs on issues related to families and children at times that are carefully chosen. There is a special department in both organizations that supervises these programs. The Radio has several daily and weekly programs aimed at children and families. The TV concentrates on cartoons (entertaining in English, educational in classical Arabic, general cartoons based on well-known stories and legends either translated or dubbed, and locally produced cartoons). Attempts were made to establish a puppet theatre but these have been put on hold for now. The National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature also plays a role. It set up "Child Culture Supervision". There are annual children festivals that include book fairs as well as programs to encourage reading. There are musical evenings and shows. The Council set up the Children's Culture House for children aged 3-12 and teens aged 13-18. It offers English language labs, computer labs, a library and a theatre as well as arts and crafts.

### **Child Protection:**

Kuwait has started to pay attention to a child's right to be the 1<sup>st</sup> to get help in the case of a natural disaster or a crisis. The government is obliged to offer help to families and individuals in such cases.

The Constitution guarantees a child protection. It also prohibits the employment of juveniles and allows for the punishment of parents who abuse their parental powers.

### **Conclusion:**

Among the problems and difficulties facing children in Kuwait is the presence of around 186 thousand foreign maids who are often given the responsibility of bringing up children especially very young children. Three studies were carried out to study the effects of this on the children. All three came to similar conclusions: relying on maids affects a child's emotional health and the bond between mother and child; children learn strange and foreign habits including religious ones, their language abilities are affected; they are left open to abuse by the maids; they become attached to something which might only be a temporary fixture in their lives and their general development is affected. A further problem in Kuwait is the large numbers of failing children, dropouts and learning difficulties as well as drugs and other addictions. Divorce is also an issue. The government has set up a family-counseling department in the Ministry of Justice. This has helped to avert divorces in some cases. More needs to be done, however, especially to raise awareness about the importance of the family in raising children. Anemia and malnutrition among pregnant women are a problem. The reasons behind them needs to be studied and solutions found. Breastfeeding rates are also going down and a committee has been set up in the Ministry of Health to promote it. Child Media needs to be worked on. At present, it is limited to some newspapers. The effects of the exposure to foreign media also needs to be monitored.