



GORDIAN KNOT

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THE PROBLEM OF VAGRANT AND BEGGAR CHILDREN IN ARMENIA

The first guest speakers of the "Gordian Knot" round table discussion series were:

- *Mr. Robert Stepanyan, Head of the Pre-school, Extension Programs, and Special Department of the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia,*
- *Lieutenant-Colonel Margar Melkonyan, Head of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Ministry of Interior Affairs and National Security, and*
- *Mr. Razmik Gasparvan, Deputy-Head of the Women's and Children's Issues Department of the Ministry of Social Security.*

In the speakers' opinion, the phenomenon of beggar and vagrant children is not a direct result of the new market economy. It is a problem common to all countries. In different places, however, it is reflected differently. Its importance is relatively more or less acute.

According to Mr. Robert Stepanyan, this issue is particularly difficult because it has been studied only superficially. To recognize the real issue, one has to study it more deeply, yet nobody in Armenia has conducted any research on it. As Mr. Razmik Gasparyan said, however, the Ministry of Social Security has started a special research project. It has not been able to find a source where the issues of beggar and vagrant children are defined. Yet, the phenomenon does exist and is spreading quickly.

If the efforts to strengthen the family, community, as well as the efforts to create support mechanisms fail, it will be difficult to succeed in any program dealing with children.

The speakers agreed that even though the main basis of the issue is a social problem, it is far from being the only one. Some parents in socially unprotected families send their children out to the street for money or food. By solving the social difficulties of these children and even by explaining the issue to them, however, the problem of beggar and vagrant children will still not be solved. If this phenomenon persists in its present form, then once you succeed in keeping one child away from begging and vagrancy, another child will quickly take his or her place. Besides social motivation, there are a number of other reasons for a child to adopt a beggar's mind-set.

The present education system in Armenia emphasizes secondary education. Other educational centers and institutions that could, perhaps, satisfy a child's interests and hobbies, are placed on the back burner. As a result, many children have a reserve of energy that, if not used positively, is 'burnt away' in socially unacceptable ways.

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In the opinion of the representative of the Ministry of Education and Science, the real problem is that Armenia now has no infrastructure or system to protect the rights of the child. Different areas and components of that system are distributed over different ministries. There is no single responsible entity for this issue. No single person has a direct responsibility for these questions. There are no controllers, and there is no mechanism to provide all these administrative support systems.

Along with the problem of beggar and vagrant children is the question of the increasing number of children in youth hostels. The speakers of the round table agreed that even though they have tried to coordinate the efforts of the different ministries associated with the problem, unfortunately, they have not reached a satisfactory result. Often, various committees and working groups within different ministries work on the same issues. One of these committees is the government committee created in 1998. It involves civil servants from the ministries of National Security, Youth and Sport Affairs, Health, Social Security, Culture, and Education and Science. The speakers gave the committee's activities an unsatisfactory grade.

The main responsibility of the Ministry of Interior Affairs and National Security in this area is to take beggar children off the streets and keep them in a special reception-distribution center for a month. According to Mr. Margar Melkonyan, after that one month, the officials of the ministry are unsure as to what to do next with the child. Where should s/he be sent to?

Usually, the children end up at the Noobarashen Youth Hostel or at the Vardashen Special School. Both schools are affiliated with the Ministries of Education and Social Security. Old teaching methods are used. According to Mr. Robert Stepanyan,

the Ministry of Education is trying to convert Vardashen Special School into a Psychological and Social Rehabilitation Center. This organization will not only work with the child, but will also try to address the family and the community that the child has come from.

If the efforts to strengthen the family, community, as well as the efforts to create support mechanisms fail, it will be difficult to succeed in any program dealing with children. These are closely inter-related concepts. This approach is strongly supported by the Ministry of Social Security. As Mr. Razmik Gasparyan mentioned, youth hostels are

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no different from isolation cells. Thus, "the road to the youth hostel and youth shelter should be barred while that leading to the family should be green", said Mr. Razmik Gasparyan. According to him,

2070 children have been adopted in the last five years.

Presently, the Ministry of Social Security is discussing the program of establishing special centers for children who lack parental care. They intend to use these centers to provide social and legal support to children and rehabilitate them socially and psychologically.

In summary, the speakers said that for children not to go through the "family-street-distributor center-special school circle", the system ought to be decentralized. The family should be closely linked to educational and social services. This also relates to the Youth Hostels that implement special educational programs and provide pedagogical support.

The representatives of the three ministries agreed that this Gordian Knot would unravel only by joining the efforts of people in the system that links the family, the community, and the state. A system must be established for the legal protection of children. The state's direct involvement in all these areas is required.