

## Feature Story

After turning 18 orphans are on their own

By: Saida Mustajbegović

In B&H, approximately 3,000 children do not have parental care and one third of them are located in a specialized state institutions. During their growing up those children are not prepared for independent life they must lead after turning 18 when they are obliged to leave these institutions and nobody cares about their future. There is no information, or estimates how many of them came into conflict with the law or never find a job because of inadequate preparation for life.

„With 18 years of age their biophysical and emotional development is not completed. They are still children, and attitude towards them is discriminatory because care of authorities' stops when they turn 18 years, while for example, the high schools are generally finished at 19 years of age. With this solution we say to these children: "You can't go to four-year high school because you'll be too old to finish it." „Much has been invested in these children because they are on state care often from birth, these are not negligible assets, and then they will be pushed into the streets and nobody takes care of what will happen to them“, says Suada Buljubašić, Professor at the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo. She notes that destiny of these children after 18-years old depends on the goodwill of the management of these institutions.

### **No Data**

Those who care themselves about abandoned children share a similar story. "Everybody should be put in the position of a young person who has to become independent at the age of 18. Legally they are adults, but in a fact they are not" says Aida Ganović, coordinator for the care of youth with SOS Kinderdorf in Bosnia. This organisation, among other things, takes care for minors with no parents, placing them in the so-called villages where they live in improvised families with other children of same destiny, and with professional hired women's as their mothers.

Adis Šabić is 23 year, and as a younger he was placed in orphanage "Family" in Zenica. Now he is inmate of the prison in Zenica.

"Everything comes down to live or die for me. I don't have anything to leave behind me. It is better for me here than it was in orphanage. I am not so thin anymore, and when somebody beats me I can defend myself. I have told them to stop beating me as in the end I will not care. When I get out of here, I know I'll be back ", says Šabić. He grew up in the orphanage, while he was teenager he searched for his mother once, but she refused to meet with him. Because of thefts he committed, he is returnee to Zenica prison. Before prison, because of conflicts with the law, he was inmate of semi-closed institutions for Correctional education of problematic minors, Institute for the education of male children and adolescents „Hum“ Sarajevo, but he escaped to Zenica, to the people he knows.

Employees of Zenica prison say that he is a good boy, Zoran Ristanović, one of educators in Correctional Institute in Zenica, knows him way back from the orphanage.

“He was a great student in primary school, exemplary overall. When he went to high school he began to study less, to avoid school...“, says Ristanović. He emphasised that children who grow up in orphanage do not develop work habits to ensure existence, but in general they expect giving. And they have problems after 18 years of age, when state concerns stops.

In Hum Institute they have three categories of inmates: children without parents' care, children who are sentenced by courts, and children from troubled families, where parents are alcoholics. In this institution they stated that they have no information or any record on what happens with inmates after becoming 18-years old.

„Few days ago two of our inmates left the Institute because they became adults and all their rights ceased to exist“, says Mustafa Agić, Director of Institute Hum, explaining children from ten to eighteen years of age are staying in this Institution. When asked where they went he said: “to relatives“. Essentially, the Institute which exists for over half of the century has a book of records on all of the children that once lived there, but there is no evidence what happened to them after they left.

From SOS Kinderdorf only since 2005 there was 558 children aged between 15 and 24 years who were supposed to leave or they already left the framework of social care. According to the available information's, there are few who did crimes after 18 years old, in most cases they do it while under the care of the state.

In BiH, no official institution has a record of the children from the Orphanages who broke the Law.

Agić further explains that in order to keep records on what is happening with kids who left the orphanages, salaries should be provided for at least one person to conduct analysis, for which the state does not allocate funds. Before taking this job, Agić was Director of Central Prison in Sarajevo for quite a while and he adds that there is no data or analyses of prisoners in this prison, which is a case on prisons in Zenica and Foča.

Minka Smajlović, Coordinator of the BiH Coordinating team for implementation of juvenile delinquency strategy, at the debate which was held in Sarajevo in late May, said that there were 1.568 juvenile crimes committed in 2009 in Federation BiH, which is 23 percent less than on 2008.

“An interesting fact is that with the transfer of seven minor inmates from Hum Institute to the newly opened Institute for educational-correctional institution for juvenile offenders in Tuzla, in the first quarter of the 2010 number of criminal acts of minors reduced by 35.6 percent in Sarajevo Canton" said Smajlović.

In 2008, SOS Kinderdorf analysed *the* protection of children without parents and based on this analysis they have indicated that public institutions for care of orphans

are not sufficiently effective in preparing children without parental care for independent living.

At the same time, the practice shows that the network of public institutions and other relevant institutions is not developed in a way that could create a significant aid to children and young people without their own families. These institutions are not linked even unofficially; they even don't even exchange phone numbers.

This network does not exist partially because of the fragmentation of administrative and legislative powers, and therefore in BiH there is no single database of minors who are under state care or information on what happens with them when they lose the right to that care. Within the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees at the Council of Ministers BiH there is a Coordinator of the Coordinating team for implementation of juvenile delinquency strategy, but they do not have data. In essence this is the only state authority dealing with children without parental care.

### **The Real Life**

“Your topic is interesting, but so far no one has dealt with it and there are no data of former orphans. There are announcements of some NGOs that they will conduct research but only at the end of the year”, says Minka Smajović from this sector.

In real life, care for children without parents in the Republic of Srpska is on entity level, while in Federation legal framework is set by Federation of BiH. Cantons should be concerned about it and provide money, but they point to the municipalities claiming that social services there have the best data. Cantons do not perform their legal obligation to report to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in the Government of the Federation about its work and to provide data from this segment. In the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy this behaviour is described as a „poor cooperation.”

There is more public institution for children without parental care in BiH. In Federation there is orphanage „Bjelave“ in Sarajevo, orphanage „Porodica“ in Zenica, orphanage for children without parental care in Tuzla, Children's Center „Most“ in Zenica, orphanage in Mostar and DD „Duga“ in Gradačac. In the NGO sector six institutions are operating: SOS Kinderdorf 'villages in Sarajevo and Gračanica, „Selo mira“ in Turija, Social-educational community in Bihać, Social center „Duga“ in Kulen Vakuf, and DD „Majčino selo“ in Biljakovići. In Republic Srpska there is only Orphanage for children without parental care "Rada Vranješević" in Banja Luka.

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"From legal point of view, our children, actually young people from public institutions are abandoned and on the streets as they leave the orphanage, but we tie ourselves to them emotionally and try to find them work that we have quite often managed exclusively with private relationships," says Amir Zelić, Director of orphanage for children without parental care "Bjelave“ in Sarajevo.

He said that through the long practices, he realized that „some of orphans in third and fourth grade of high school, in a fear of turning 18, intentionally did anything they could to repeat the grade”. He also pointed out that some of the children who come to

orphanage have been already „neglected“ so the problem is to teach them basic hygiene, carrying out school obligations...

Similar experiences are shared by his colleague Vinka Belenzada from Orphanage for children without parental care "Rada Vranješević" Banja Luka.

"We have no data about former orphans. The social work centres should know more about them "says Belenzada.

In Sarajevo and Banja Luka educational-correctional institutions they pointed out that so far they had donations from NGO sector, and thanks to them they have resolved some of problems of those who left orphanage.

With the help of "Hope and Homes for Children" in Sarajevo several orphans from orphanage Bjelave are employed. A non-governmental organization "Peace Flame Foundation" from Holland has bought a house for youth who has left the orphanages, so-called halfway house which is led by Social Services of the Canton of Sarajevo, which often has no money for maintenance and stay of youth in it.

"We have criteria for admitting youth in this house. Recently, we did not receive one person, because we estimated that it could be a problem, in the earlier group, they required by themselves exclusion of one member because of inappropriate behaviour by one person in the house shuts down", says Latifa Kapetanović, Head of Legal Affairs, Cantonal coordination and information center for social work in Sarajevo.

She points out that young people are unsupervised at the house, on one floor are young men, on the other floor are young girls and social workers periodically visited them.

"It is different when there is a system solution. So far we were lucky and there were no incidents because they were the golden generations, but what will happen considering the facts of crime increase in society, and decrease in donations", Zelić asked, and warns that the state must find ways to care for orphans after their 18-year.

### **Semi-Independence**

The only organization which takes care some of its orphans after they turn 18 is SOS Kinderdorf. For them they have a semi-independent living programs (ages 15 and up to 18-year), but even after that there are certain ways of providing further assistance, by providing support until they are really independent. The ones that have no property do get assistance to solve their housing issue – states Aida Ganović. She emphasises that they are all good people and so far not one of them had problems with Law.

In 2008 this NGO made an analysis with regards to the rights of youth that are exiting the system of public care in BiH. According to this research 21% of former care receivers managed to get a job, 2% are misusing drugs or alcohol, while 1,8% are in conflict with Law. However it is emphasised in the report that some of the replies are incomplete.

(The research done in cooperation with SCOOP, Danish Project for support for investigative journalism in the countries of Western Balkans).

**Text box: They used to be the priority when applying for a job**

Everyone included in a process of caring for minors (teachers, social workers, and others) are suggesting that in the past this category of population had a priority when applying for a job, which not the case today.

„Number of children without parental care is not decreasing, in addition to physical orphans, we have increasing numbers of economical orphans, as there is more and more parents who are unable or don't want to take care of their children.” States Buljubašić. The stories how the orphans with 18 years lose the right for a position in a state institution in BiH are not a part of any statistics. There is no precise data how many of them has finished school, got a job, or is in a conflict with a Law, and neglect towards the youth that is exiting the system of public care might have its consequences. Many agree that BiH society was simply lucky so far.

**Text box: Children with special needs**

Particular problem among children without parental care are the children with special needs. In one moment 40 of those children were supposed to leave the system. “The specialised institutions are sending requests to send those children somewhere else, and this is not organised, and we are scared as they are currently risk category for human trafficking” – states Latifa Kapetanovic, Head of Legal Services, Coordination and Information of Centar for social work of Sarajevo Canton.

**Text box: Vernes's 467 acts of crime**

As an example Zelić talks about boy named Vernes who by the time he turned 18 committed 467 criminal acts. Vernes lived in Hum Institute for years. “Vernes might have killed someone as after 460 time he committed a theft, nothing happened to him but a working froms ocial services and increased overseeing in Insitute. During all these years he was all over the media, had his cover pages, while the examplatory students were mentioned by initials.” – says Zelić, emphasising that there should be way to make Vernes an example how those kids should be treated and what kind of sanction they should be given. Dragan Budimir (49) who lived in Hume and Zenica home “Family” today as Šabić is doing his time in Zenica Prison, and he thinks that the mistake was done in early stages. “They used to separate the good kids, from the ones like me. They don't do it anymore” – says Budimir.

**Text box: Foster families the best model**

Republika Srpska Government in September 2009 has made a “Strategy to improve the social protection of the children without parental care with the action plan 2009-2014”, by which one of the priorities is to support the youth who are leaving organised way of social care. The strategy has described state of affairs and possibilities, has given recommendations, but in the relevant Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Republika Srpska they did not give examples of how this has been done. Bojan Zec of Social services from Banja Luka region has best results when it comes to placing children in foster families.

“Within the last four to five years most of the children have been placed with foster families, and this has shown as a best model all over the world.” – Stated Zec, but he has no records on how their measures of social politics are influencing the children who were protected by state.