

Youth, Agency, and Migration: The Effects of the Refugee Crisis on Unaccompanied Minors in Greece **Diya Chopra, Class of 2018**

War, broken homes, long journeys and vulnerable children, these were the things I associated with the refugee crisis. This summer I had the opportunity to hear stories from youth refugees themselves and I realized how much I was missing from the narrative. A UNICEF report dated May 2017 states there were over 300,000 unaccompanied minor refugees worldwide in 2015/16. Of these 170,000 sought asylum in Europe. That is why I based my research project around the hopes and dreams of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Thessaloniki, Greece. Although this was an independent research project, I worked under the guidance of the Global Humanitarian Lab in Geneva and their partners, Terre de Hommes and Arsis to gain a deeper understanding of UAMs from both a humanitarian and human rights perspective. During my three days in Budapest with TDH, I was exposed to the human rights issues UAMs face while crossing borders. TDH helped me set up five meetings with NGOs that provide asylum and integration support. Many refugees who eventually reach Greece pass through Hungary during their journey. Hungarian borders are known to be one of the toughest entry points as the right-wing government has put restrictions on aid provided by NGOs and tightened immigration laws. This was put into perspective when I interviewed a young boy from Kashmir in Greece and he related how dogs were released on him at the border.

In Budapest, I met a cultural anthropologist who had previously worked in Greece with 'Arsis'. This proved invaluable as she suggested activities I could design to build relationships and gain trust. My objective was to ensure the children facilitate the discussion and feel comfortable. One of the most fascinating activities was the 'Tree of Life'. This involved the children drawing a tree that symbolized different aspects of their life; the roots represented important relationships they had built, the trunk, their skills as well as those they wanted to learn and the branches, their hopes and dreams. It allowed children to talk about their lives and past experiences in a positive manner. This facilitated conversations about their interests and helped with follow-up questions in interviews.

My fieldwork began in Thessaloniki, Greece at The Arsis Youth Support Center- a safe space for children under 19 and their families to seek legal help, informal schooling, housing, translation services and access to workshops. Most families were Syrian or Bulgarian. I was surprised by the disproportionate number of UAMs from Pakistan and the low Syrian representation but learnt that Syrians usually travel with their families.

My first two weeks were spent building relationships. I managed to establish a rapport with the Pakistani boys and gain their trust because we shared a common language, Urdu. This was an incredible advantage because no one else in the youth center spoke Urdu. The boys were desperately lonely and happy to have someone who they could converse with in their mother tongue. However, the close bonds I made presented challenges I was unprepared for - several marriage proposals! I mastered the precarious balancing act of managing their fragile emotions while keeping a professional distance.

I interviewed 7 staff members - street workers who had brought children from the camps, the coordinator of the organization, the sports psychologist, a Syrian translator, the education coordinator and a psychologist working at the shelter. The objective was to assess how they worked differently with children in comparison to adults. I also attended training sessions conducted for Arsis staff. A particularly effective one was at a mobile school constructed out of a trailer fitted with 300 educational panels. The Mobile School is a bottom up innovation with a unique revenue model. Instead of relying on philanthropy, it gets 70% of its funding by conducting management training programs designed for senior executives in large corporations based on practical skills that street children use to navigate their hostile environments.

In my final two weeks, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews that lasted between 10-20 minutes with 7 Pakistani boys, 1 Kashmiri boy, 1 Algerian boy and 1 Syrian boy. These boys all lived in Pylea, a shelter provided by Arsis. The most revealing conversations were about the respect and dignity. This was expressed in simple desires for clothes that fit and people who listen and empathize. However, when they opened up they shared dreams of becoming cricketers, football players, engineers, tattoo artists, and translators. One limitation was the lack of female representation. I was informed that in Syria and Pakistan it is culturally inappropriate for girls to travel alone. The boys also mentioned the risk for girls was almost double if they traveled alone and related horrific incidents they had witnessed.

I presented my initial findings to the Global Humanitarian Lab in Geneva. GHL is a partnership program within the United Nations Office for Project Services that brings together the Red Cross, Medecins Sans Frontieres and several UN agencies and NGOs to enhance the innovation needed to solve humanitarian crises. GHL will share my research with their partner organizations and its collaborative venture with MIT D-Lab which uses creative capacity building techniques to create technologies to improve the lives of underprivileged populations. This semester I will complete an independent study based on my summer research under the guidance of Professor Van Vleet.

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