The Lives of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors during their Transit Stay in Greece

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Abstract

This article explores daily threats in the lives of unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) in Greece. The aim is to stimulate debate and understanding in the context of growing forced migration. Our observations, arguments, and conclusions are primarily informed by critical discussion of politics, policies, and legislation of the European Union, Greece, and international treaties on human rights. Our analysis also draws upon impressions from site visits and interviews with social workers at urban shelters and supervised apartments of semi-independent living (SILs) on the Greek mainland. Aspects related to the social quality of URMs’ daily circumstances include quality of accommodation, presence of contact persons, sense of safety and security, and social inclusion. Vulnerabilities related to the insecurities of temporary transit status are central. The availability of formal and informal services providing care, protection, recovery, education, sports, and well-being is essential. The social quality perspective frames our analysis and interpretation.

Keywords: accommodation, insecurity, migrant policies, normative criteria, refugees, social quality, transit stay, URMs

This article analyzes aspects of the social quality of the daily living circumstances of unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs). Risks and anxieties are accentuated by the absence of parents or caretakers during their transit stay, and they run specific risks regarding the social quality of their daily lives. Personal capacities and interactions, physical conditions, services provided, and wider political and cultural pressures shape and color their experience. Their daily lives are characterized by fluid insecurity, and our study should thus be appreciated as a reflection on the dynamics of the fragility of lives in transit.

Public media rarely do justice to the interacting challenges for URMs, which in turn are profoundly influenced by tides and frictions affecting the refugee groups as a whole. This article is intended to inform new politics and policies for helping URMs in Greece and the EU. It and many other resources indicate that their living circumstances “on the move” are seriously lacking and call for attention to this human
“problematique.” The social quality approach offers interesting perspectives with which to develop comprehensive understanding of the multidimensionality of this pressing global challenge. This article has an exploratory nature. It is based on two distinct kinds of resources: (1) extensive reviews of literature and documents; (2) empirical impressions of the researchers from site visits at URM accommodation.

In the first section we describe aspects of the social quality frameworks and the empirical methodology applied. The empirical data are drawn from interviews with social workers and from visits to a limited selection of URM accommodation sites. The second section provides a review of issues in recent European Union and Greek migration policies impacting refugees and URMs during their intended transit to Europe via Greece. The evolving political discourse and consequences of these policies are critically discussed. In the third section the results of the empirical research into aspects of URMs’ daily life are presented. The findings depict dialectic processes between (objective) conditional and (subjective) constitutional factors, which constitute the social quality level of the URMs’ daily circumstances (IASQ 2019: 13).

Reference is made to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although, for now, this crisis lies behind us, the pandemic context—because it clearly accentuated the adverse impacts on vulnerable people and contexts—is enlightening for the social quality of URMs’ daily life (Kondilis et al. 2021; Barn et al. 2021). In the last section, our findings are discussed and conclusions are offered. The findings concerning the URM accommodations we visited are encouraging. Through consideration of human rights imperatives and social work principles, we expose ways in which cultural tendencies, policies, and legislation pose barriers and fragilities in the social quality of URMs’ lives.

**General Background Information**

Greece has a long history as a major “port of arrival” into Europe for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. Currently the majority are fleeing armed conflict and poverty in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa and seek safety in Europe. In 2015, the situation in Greece, with a peak of 861,630 refugees, was more intensive than in any other European Union member state, and was labeled a “refuge crisis.” In line with Greece’s obligations under international law, asylum seekers are permitted to remain within the country pending a decision on their case. The process is laborious. Comprehensive interviews at the Immigration Service evaluate the evidence for each claim. If approved, temporary legal status converts into permanent permission to stay and the opportunity to apply for family reunification with immediate relatives. The applicant has right of appeal in case of dismissal (MM&A 2020). In the case of URMs, appointed guardians or representatives assist them with the process (MM&A 2023c).

Large flows of asylum seekers and lengthy application procedures result in the accumulation of considerable numbers staying in Greece. During the period of waiting
for the completion of the asylum procedure, those identified “vulnerable” at the entry points (those with health issues, mental health issues, or disabilities, URMs, single parents, victims of trafficking, etc.) are granted accommodation on the Greek mainland. According to the UNHCR, by June 2022 a total of 147,420 refugees and 22,117 asylum seekers were residing in Greece. Women accounted for 21 percent of this population and children for 27 percent, of whom seven out of ten were younger than twelve years old (UNHCR 2023a). Between January 2016 and 1 March 2023, 36,435 URMs were officially recorded in Greece. As of February 2023, 2,516 were registered: 84 percent boys, 16 percent girls, and 7 percent younger than fourteen years old. Countries of origin were Afghanistan (24 percent), Pakistan (14 percent), Syria (8 percent), and others (e.g., Somalia, Congo, Eritrea) (54 percent). Forty-five were separated from their family in the journey, and twelve were from Ukraine, accompanied by three caretakers (UNHCR 2023b).

Asylum seekers entering Greece intend to obtain international protection in order to have the right to travel to their destination country in Europe. Many try to hide from registration and do not choose to learn the language or access employment, so as to travel onward “under the radar.” A favorable destination is Sweden, due to its supposed educational opportunity and generous respect of the human rights of child migrants. URMs strongly want to fulfill their parents’ wishes by continuing their trip to Europe (Buchanan and Kallinikaki 2018). The strong desire of refugees to pass through Greece has been countered by increasingly strict securitization along EU member states’ borders, as discussed below. The outcomes of the actions and choices of governments, NGOs, and professionals all require ethical scrutiny with respect to the rights and best interests of each person.

Greece, since the tsunami of refugees a decade ago, faces numerous challenges as a country, including economic stagnation, high levels of unemployment and a sharp increase in poverty within the general population as well as among refugees and migrants.

Konstantios Kougias has analyzed and interpreted the societal, socioeconomic, and welfare situation of Greece at the point when the decline was increasing since 2009. He concluded that the neoliberally oriented reforms of the past decade “extended insecurity and commodification (selling public property, marketization of erstwhile publicly distributed services) and curtailed the already inefficient welfare provisions. The re-calibration of the welfare state in the new era of fiscal consolidation ignores and underestimates the need to address equity. The less privileged, the young and those in precarious employment suffer most” (Kougias 2014: 65). In these circumstances, Greece was not prepared or equipped to receive, accommodate, and legally process growing numbers of refugees.

This article does not examine the situation for displaced refugee minors from Ukraine. These mostly arrive in Greece with their families and benefit from “temporary protection status,” which provides them with residence permits, rights to work and study, and free access to the health and social care system. In the case of un-
accompanied minors, the National Mechanism for the Identification and Protection of URMss activates their transfer to special emergency accommodation facilities, where after the relevant identification and guardianship procedure, adult relatives are able to undertake the care and custody of their minor relatives (MM&A 2023a).

Research Approach

In structuring the analysis, and the conclusions in this article, we applied the social quality perspective, as presented in the double themed issue of the *IJSQ* on the societal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Nijhuis and Van der Maesen 2021). We gathered information about the social quality of daily life circumstances, based on the analytical framework of the four categories of factors that codetermine the level of social quality. These are: socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment. Immanent reciprocal processes between these factors and constitutional factors result in a specific level of social quality. Conditional (objective) factors refer to opportunities and resources from society that enable actors to influence relationships in order to create or adjust to a new context of self-realization (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012). The social quality analytical approach was already deployed in Greece in 2005 (Petmesidou and Polyzoidis 2005).

The empirical data in our study covers conditional factors, because these refer to the daily circumstances in which URMss have to live. Of course, these continuously interact with specific constitutional factors that are intrinsic to and characterize personal properties. In our presentation, these constitutional factors—though not explicitly listed—are immanently in play to achieve particular levels of social quality. Because the social quality approach did not constitute the framework through which the original data collection was designed and executed, a consequent (sub)division into the four conditional factors could not be imposed. Furthermore, in our discussion and conclusion regarding the findings, we work with the normative social quality criteria to judge the moral outcomes of our investigations.

The first part of our study is a discourse analysis of Greek and EU policies and cultural tendencies. This part is based on analyses and critical interpretations of policy documents, legislation, and laws. The revealed tendencies relate to studies and reports on practices the daily lives of refugees. In our interpretations and judgment of what happens in reality, we deploy the normative (moral) criteria derived from the social quality perspective.

The empirical part of our research draws upon data from visits and meetings of Shula Ramon, Professor at the University of Hertfordshire, James Cox, Lecturer at the Dundee University, and the author of this article with the staff and hosted URMss in three shelters and two SILs in northern Greece in November 2019. These were part of the comparative research project “Promoting Migrant and Refugee Social Work: A Comparative Perspective” between UK, Italy, Slovenia and Greece (Ramon and Cox
The aim was to grasp differences regarding the reception, safeguarding conditions, accommodation, and school integration of URMs. An additional empirical source of data is the narratives of two young asylum seekers and six social workers who participated in a comparative qualitative research project. They were interviewed between December 2020 and March 2021. This study explored the strengths and weaknesses of the social work practice with asylum seekers in Greece and Italy, including how it has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kallinikaki et al. 2024 – in press).

The design of our study implies limitations to generalizability. The findings are indicative, rather than representative of the situation in Greece. The focus—directed by the available data—has been placed on formal accommodations in the northern mainland. It thus excludes the large number of URMs in other accommodations, a total of seventy shelters, seventy nine SILs and in six emergency accommodation facilities (UNHCR 2023b), and those who reside in informal accommodations, stay with relatives in the same area, or live in shelters or camps on the islands.

Frictions Due to Politics, Policies, and Cultural Tendencies

Migration policies in Greece, the EU, and its member states are on the one hand meant to protect and adequately process refugees. They are supposed to reflect an adequate understanding of the circumstances of refugees’ daily life, and therefore aim to sustain a reasonable standard of living. On the other hand, they reflect the political will of the EU states, which currently express increasing tendencies toward protectionism, nationalism, and xenophobia. Many current policies impose restrictions that make life worse for those living in the dreary circumstances of being transit refugees. As will be shown, these distinct realms create tensions and conflicts of interest.

Currently, a wide range of very unfavorable responses by EU member states to the persistent flows of migration may be noted. Security measures have increased along the borders of the EU member states. Walls, military patrols, and wire fences aim to deter refugees and migrants before they reach their countries of destination. In March 2021, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson announced the provision of 250 million Euros for funding the construction of five new gated Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) with 3,000 places each for the new sea arrivals in equal number of Aegean islands (Fallon, 2021a) Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, contributes to the spiraling of the securitisation of the migration in EU posing survival, existential threats, and militarisation (Léonard and Kaunert 2022:1417). Clashes between border guards and refugees can be volatile. Local community groups offering support along the southeastern territorial fringes of the EU report pushbacks, exclusions, and violence (Hameršak 2021; Morales 2021).

Since July 2019 significant changes have taken place. The Greek government, dominated by the New Democratic Party, has taken a tough anti-immigrant stance, which includes strategic targets for deportations. Refugees squatting in abandoned
buildings in cities have been evicted. Important services provided by national and international NGOs have shrunk, including Médecins Sans Frontières’ clinics for migrants and refugees. “ESTIA,” the big accommodation program run by UNHCR and municipalities, has been streamlined and transferred to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.

In June 2021, Greece declared Turkey a “safe third country” for people from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This provided the legal ground for ruling many asylum claims “inadmissible.” Afghans fleeing the Taliban and trying to enter Greece were told that “Greece will not be their ‘gateway’ to Europe” (Fallon 2021b). This policy of August 2021 sparked an outcry from many NGOs and human rights groups and organizations (e.g., the International Rescue Committee and the Greek Council for Refugees). Border enforcement has increased and reinforced criminal “trafficking networks,” which have launched a new and highly dangerous sea route from Turkey to the shores of Italy through the Central Aegean Sea. The journey is hazardous and leads to many deaths by drowning. A worst took place on June 14 2023, when a fishing vessel with 750 people on board, sunk off in Pylos - Peloponnese and only 104 migrants rescued, besides it was spotted by the aerial vehicle of the EU border protection agency Frontex and by two ships (Niarchos, 2023).

The most recent strategies of expansion of the wall along the EU and Greek land border with Turkey and the establishment of gated RICs on three Aegean islands were confirmed by the Minister of Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachis, at the Delphi Economic Forum on 29 April 2023: “Europe should be the one who selects who comes, and supports the construction of fencing indirectly through paying for necessary complimentary infrastructure and technology. Greece has secured 100 million euros from [the] EU as part of the multiannual framework for such investments in the Evros region” (MM&A 2023b).

Since 1992, Greece and many EU member states have been signatories of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC). This convention stipulates children’s entitlement to specific and appropriate accommodation schemes, protection and care, promotion of their best interests, nondiscrimination, family reunification, and protection from all forms of harm and exploitation. Despite EU policies to reach common standards for appropriate accommodation and care, analyses of fifty-eight accommodation settings in different EU member states reveal that their standards vary considerably. This concerns performance in several respects: separation versus integration, control versus autonomy, protection, and low-intensity versus intensive care (Lietaert et al. 2020).

Yet little has been done to optimize the initial reception of URMs, their age assessment procedures, accommodation, relocation, health services, school programs, and skills training (Barn et al. 2021). The “protection gap” concerning URM detention and reception facilities has been clearly demonstrated by Ilse Derluyn (2018). Deficiencies and unreliability within the reception system in Greece were reported in the Greek Ombudsman’s report of 2018 (Synigoros 2018). Their initial accommodation
in Europe does not put an end to problems for the URMs. Welcome practices are not sufficient to meet their basic needs, and sometimes even contravene their rights to protection as children (Barn et al. 2021). Serious shortcomings are found in addressing family separation, mental health and trauma, the need for a sense of belonging, facilitation of agency, and development of resilience (Kohli 2011; Chase 2013; Schumacher et al. 2019: 4).

In Greece, changes have arguably been introduced by various recent laws and policies. Law 4554/2018 on the regulatory framework for the guardianship of unaccompanied minors replaced the Guardianship by the Public Prosecutor for Minors with a Supervisory Guardianship Board. The latter keeps a Registry of Guardians, each of whom is responsible for twenty children. Since February 2020, a Special Secretariat for the Protection of URMs residing in and passing through operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. It plans, implements, and supervises relevant national policies, organizes the management of accommodations and relocation, and safeguards URMs’ protection. Law 4760/2020 ceases Protective Custody and prevents newly arrived URMs from being detained in police stations at entry points. However, URMs are still forced to stay in custody for months with unrelated adults. This is widely criticized as a contravention of child rights.

A recent ministerial decision has set the Standard Operating Procedures and Licensing Framework of the Accommodation Centers (MM&A, 2023c) putting an end to the long-lasting lack of a coherent framework for the establishment and operation of NGOs and services for URMs. This had resulted in short-term, partial targets and fragmented interventions by a wide variety of NGOs, local authorities, and civil society activist movements (Fili and Xythali 2018). Less has been done for the implementation of foster care; between 2016 and 2020, only 104 URMs were placed in foster families by the NGO METAdrasi. This reflects the absence of a coherent national family policy even after the reform of the national policy for fostering, introduced by L. 4538/2018 (Cox 2021). The creation of the first Dormitory for Homeless URMs of sixty beds in the city of Athens in April 2021, in collaboration with UNHCR and the Municipality of Athens, is one remarkable achievement (METAdrasi 2024).

Another significant change concerns the gradual abandonment of the so-called experimental model of “Humanitarian Governance Crisis.” This approach was widely applied in Greece and involved collaboration of central and regional authorities, international organizations, European institutions, NGOs, local governments, and local civil society (Papataxiarchis 2016; Kandylaki and Nagopoulos 2021). Instead, support at entry points was made the responsibility of citizens, neighborhoods, and organized solidarity in urban areas and the bigger cities.

A complicated, multiple, and changeable web of Greek and EU laws, regulations, and treaties is interfering with the living circumstances of refugees, in particular URMs. Though most of these are meant to protect children, reality makes clear that as yet, the conditional factors to sustain an acceptable level of social quality are far from being present.
The Social Quality of URMs’ Daily Living Circumstances

In the following we present our findings from site visits to shelters and SILs in northern Greece. The findings concern the social quality of the daily circumstances of URMs’ lives. Our observations are drawn from direct inspections of the quality of these accommodation facilities, and from interviews with social workers and some URMs. Our empirical observations are interspersed with theoretical considerations and discussions, derived from various relevant studies and literature. We describe our observations from the social quality perspective of objective conditional factors. These, after all, to a large extent determine the social quality of URMs’ daily lives. These conditional factors, refer to the specific qualities of socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment. They are intrinsically linked to four (subjective) constitutional factors: personal security, social recognition, social responsiveness, and personal capacities (IASQ 2019: 13).

Dealing with the Insecurities of Life

For children, emotional factors inform specific levels of social quality, influenced by multiple encounters and changes in their everyday world (Campos-Delgado 2019). Social workers in the SILs we visited argued that many URMs experience persistent stress and instability in their relationships, alongside pervasive feelings of being controlled and kept under surveillance. There is always the threat that a “potentially dangerous person” may blur their legal status (Fontanari 2019: 135). Although care and supportive provisions are given with sympathetic intentions, they are often delivered in the broader context of a hostile environment (Hameršak 2021).

However, URMs’ strong will to succeed often enables them to overcome (but also to underestimate) their exposure to risks and dangers on their journey to Greece. An interviewed social worker argued: “They believe that thanks to their own and their mothers’ faith, they are strong enough to endure any particular challenge. Being encouraged by their faith to God, who helps unconditionally, they strongly hope for a happy end.” Their insecurity is sometimes apparent in their basic orientation in time and space. The present for them is not linked to a particular place. It may be everywhere. This creates strong feelings about their identity, the awareness of who they are. Their hopes and dreams for a new future either sustain or transfix them. As noted by Moa Lønning and Ravi Kohli (2022), URMs’ narratives are frequently focused on the immediacy of their situation and on seeking onward migration. The fears and depression they experienced during their journey become memories. A seventeen-year-old Syrian boy shared his experience of feelings becoming memories: “During the journey when I was stuck, I was scared, waiting for days, weeks. Very anxious. But, when I was underway, those fears disappeared. The only thing on my mind was to arrive, as fast as possible, [it] did not matter how, just get here.” Social workers underline that personal problems, loneliness, alienation, relationship conflicts including trauma, anxiety, and
sleep disorders are minimized or overshadowed by URMs’ strong commitment to continue their journey: “The will to continue their trip is very strong. Thus, they focus only on the relevant procedures. All other issues, such as schooling, well-being, health and mental health recovery are less important, or not important at all.”

In the approaches of social workers, that we observed, the aim is to reinforce their URMs’ feelings of identity and strength. Strength-based approaches primarily focus on positives and potentials rather than on problems and shortcomings, avoiding characterization of URMs as victims. Models of risk assessment and assessment of (behavioral) problems are not the primary focus to identify resources for treatment. Instead, URMs are stimulated to think about their future, hopes, expectations, and intentions. In the same vein, their identity is supported, for example, through bringing together photographs of moments of life in the shelter and in the community. Regular workshops focus on the development of individual and interpersonal skills. Weekly community meetings of all staff members and URMs aim to empower the minors’ participation in the daily life of the shelter community. Social workers become the first primary contact persons for URMs, their “persons of reference.” They welcome the children, help them adjust to their new places of residence, help with their recovery, and become the person, who listens to them and supports them in daily activities and contacts with their family elsewhere. This mentor-like relationship between the URMs and the companionable staff, which includes counseling, constitutes a pillar in the children’s well-being (Kohli 2006). Sometimes the interpersonal embeddedness of children with the staff and volunteers resembles maternal/ or paternal relationships. Interviewed social workers admitted that their own resilience is sustained through teamwork, moments of connection, celebration of achievements, access to supervisors, and participation in anti-racist and human rights movements.

**Accommodation and Socioeconomic Security**

The selection of shelters we visited seemed to meet the basic standards for adequate housing and care of URMs, though did not equate to “family-based care,” such as foster care. This “ideal” provision is not available at short notice (Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015; Barn et al. 2021). The shelters visited hosted twenty to thirty URMs aged up to eighteen, from Syria, Iraq, and North Africa. Two accommodated boys aged five to twelve, and two hosted girls aged five to eighteen. We judged the quality of these accommodations to be rather high. Everything was clean and in good condition. The bedrooms with bunk beds for four to six people were not overcrowded. Provisions such as sleep packs, sleep masks, earplugs, and night-lights were present to allow children to have a good night’s sleep. All provisions to sustain a reasonable social quality of life were present: both physical and emotional care; sufficient nutrition, clothing, and education; health, legal, and psychosocial support; and stable Wi-Fi facilities. Teams of social workers, pedagogues, and interpreters cooperated with authorities in Greece and overseas to seek long-term solutions suitable to the best interests of each
child, such as reunification with distant relatives. Two boys, who elected to fly to the UK, shared with us their itinerary, which was accompanied by staff, and their relief at achieving their ambition to live with their relatives. Many boys enjoyed sports and especially football. The atmosphere between the staff and young people seemed warm and trusting. The shelters we visited gave the impression of being safe havens. In the kitchen, dining block staff and boys were involved in cooking together. Rules for active community life inside the shelter and outside in the neighborhood were explicit and clear, which is an important condition for security and safety (Kohli 2011).

Socioeconomic security refers to risks and opportunities regarding the financial and material aspects of URMs’ daily lives in their transit situations (Gordon 2012: 116). After initial registration at entry points, URMs are entitled to the provision of accommodation facilities and the “Temporary Insurance and Health Care Number,” which includes a subsistence cash card and free health and social assistance. In shelters, socioeconomic security is guaranteed for those up to eighteen. In SILs, URMs between sixteen and twenty-four years old are entitled to the same. The small amount of pocket money is usually spent on the use of smartphones. These communicative devices are appreciated by many as part of their well-being. During the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were their “lifelines.” Bus cards are provided, giving access to public transportation.

Trust and Hope as Basic Drivers of Belonging

Social cohesion is another important conditional factor for achieving social quality in daily life. It is driven by trust, integrative norms and values, and social networks (Berman and Phillips 2012). Migration and constant transition between accommodations disrupt essential human relationships (Theocharidou 2016). URMs are thrown into situations of deep uncertainty and recurring traumatic experiences. A state of anxiety may emerge when it is impossible for a long time to predict their future and living circumstances. Experiences of violence and torture erode the capacity to trust—such a key quality for recovery. Social workers underlined the priority of establishing a trust-based professional relationship. This quotation is indicative: “[A] trust-based relationship is the basis, because URMs’ ability to trust unknown [people] and people of foreign nations has been threatened during their journey.” Feelings of trust between staff and URMs are a foundation for relationships that can encompass care, mentoring, and companionship (Lietaert et al. 2020: 396).

Hope is another significant force in enhancing the strength of relationships between URMs and social workers, and the community within and outside the accommodation can be enhanced when hope is nurtured (Boddy et al. 2017: 8). Even after the experience of profound struggle, destruction, chaos, and trauma, hope may emerge, enabling recovery and well-being. Therefore, hope-building programs and inspiring practices receive much attention in social work to make URMs feel safe and at home. A study among 132 URMs aged six to sixteen in a temporary transit camp
on Lesvos revealed that they experienced afternoon schoolwork as a “hopeful” space. Here children function as normal students in a safe environment, enabling growth in cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal realms (Asher et al. 2021). Group work and community meetings in shelters and SILs are held to promote the sense of belonging and solidarity. Where there is stability and continuity of care, trusting relationships are more likely to occur.

**Aspects of Social Inclusion and Social Empowerment**

Our interviews showed that encouraging URMs to participate in communities, social networks, and institutions constitutes an important resource for social empowerment. Members of the community play a crucial role in facilitating social inclusion (Lietaert et al. 2020: 393). They volunteer for mentoring, teaching language courses or music, helping with homework, or organizing theater performances and sports. Through these channels, school-age children are enabled to attend ordinary schools and have friendships outside the shelters and access to sports facilities, cinemas, and music events. The URMs’ well-being is inextricably connected to social and educational inclusion. Besides learning and achievement, the sense of belonging is an essential aspect of being in school (Richman 1998; Ward 2021). In the shelters we visited, much attention was devoted to education and community integration. However, we found that some URMs refused regular schooling. Two boys from Iraq respectively said, “I will enroll [at] school in Sweden [his destination country], [the] Greek language is difficult to learn and will be useless there,” and “Me? I was not interested at all, it was a girl from Africa who pursued me to attend [school] with her.” This is why, during the spread of COVID-19, when all schooling was online, the social workers interviewed expressed frustration over “the lack of devices and Wi-Fi, making individual connections to so many different remote classes impossible.”

Education enables children to grow toward their potential. Participation in community networks, inside and outside shelters and SILs, also empowers children. Individual mentoring ensures that feelings of helplessness and insecurity are shared. Marcus Herz and Philip Lalander (2021), interviewing twenty URMs seeking asylum in Europe, collected stories of powerlessness and frustration that emerged when they met officials in positions of authority, were held under suspicion, or were categorized as a potential threat. The authors depict how, when their stories are thoughtfully listened to, URMs’ self-perception, agency, and self-esteem can evolve. Lønning and Kohli (2022) echo these findings. They show that unfolding the memories and mementos of Afghan URMs can provide a bridge toward a sense of safety and a sustainable future. Continuity of connections with the cultures of origin can also play a vital part in supporting existential security, structure, meaning, and developing identity (Valtonen 2002). This should be valued as “saving something of the innumerous losses from the past they have experienced” (Käkelä 2020: 430). As one coordinating social worker stated: “The weekly action ‘Saving our Cultures’ is most effective; it started
with individual carpets to pray, cooking, music, dancing, traditional use of water and soil, [and] games of their childhood, with the interpreters’ involvement. Minors expect and enjoy this sense of home every week.” Familiar tastes, scents, and foods, and memories of serving methods or ways of having lunch at home, may evoke feelings of integration, inclusion, and belonging (Wade et al. 2012).

Conclusions

In and around the shelters and SILs we visited, wherever possible various activities and creative methods are employed to compensate for URMs’ insecurities and threats to their identity and well-being. These facilities and their social workers examined in our study seemed like oases for children’ resilience. They provide a window to “good practices” and perspectives on traumas, anxieties, and the potential of URMs in transit. As stated, they do not present an average picture of how URMs are accommodated and dealt with during their transit stay in Greece. However, they have been shown to emphasize the need and moral duty to recognize the appalling conditions of these children and invest in actions to relieve their situation. This regards both international and Greek legislation and policies, and the availability of practical tools to make the best of the situation. Speaking in terms of the social quality ethical criteria, this is a question of human dignity, social justice, equal value, and solidarity.

The assignment of a URM to an individual contact person who supports the minor in a personal way and looks after the retaining or reestablishing of contact with family in home land and in destination country is identified as a critical feature in assuring an acceptable standard of social quality. The deployment of child-centered, strength-based social work approaches, together with the care for peer relationships, reflect an atmosphere in which the hosted URM can feel like a child or adolescent. Well-organized and adequately staffed shelters and SILs can be considered “stations of supply” for URMs on the move. Our findings harmonize with those of Kelly Devenney (2019) on the relationships between URMs and social work professionals, with the latter reframed as “co-navigators.” Such co-navigators help the URMs plot a course through the shifting and increasingly inhospitable landscape of Greek and EU immigration regimes. Relation containment offers an experience of feeling held and protected, both in a physical and emotional sense, and has become a tool, as well as a synonym for social quality. The “stations of supply” we visited were enlightening for a better comprehension of the life of URMs. Our presentation of them is in no way intended to provide nationalistic hubris, according to which Greece will be seen as “good enough,” “justified,” or “having legitimate reasons” for its current policies and the provisions it undertakes.

From the perspective of URMs the evolving patterns of cultural, political, and policy tendencies are seriously worrisome. The status of being a refugee, and in particular a URM, is in itself a product of poignant violations and infringements of
human rights in their home countries (Kallinikaki 2019: 29). We have shown that at present, in the global, EU, and Greek political and cultural contexts, tendencies are appearing that clearly express an increasing hostility regarding refugees and migrants. URMs are almost like “canaries in the mine.” Their increased vulnerability provides early fears and demonstrates needs across all refugee age groups. Current policies in the EU have created an environment in which asylum-seeking refugee families must separate at immense emotional costs, with the risk of long-term harm for children (Dubow and Kuschminder 2021). These societal tendencies absolutely contradict the globally accepted moral principle of “the best interests of the child” (Bhabha 2019; Humphris and Sigona 2019). The daily circumstances of the lives of children on the move do not benefit from these evolving policies. They will be excluded from empowering provisions and care that enhance their socioeconomic security, social inclusion, and empowerment. Although children in Greece are protected explicitly by the Greek Constitution, the UNCRC 1989 Convention, and many EU directives, recent Greek neoliberal and anti-refugee policies adversely affect the chances to pursue “the best interest of the refugee minor.” The 2009 socioeconomic crisis and the 2015/2016 “refugee crisis” have seriously undermined the Greek national child and family policy and foster care framework (Kallinikaki 2019). All this in the long run will result in detrimental impacts on URMs.

Research conducted in 2018 on social workers working with refugees in Greece revealed “a strong tendency among practitioners in the field claiming a social and political role of social work for social justice, a part attempt to have a political role, act collectively, have links with the anti-racist movement, intervene in public discourse and act as human rights defenders” (Teloni et al. 2021: 15). This conclusion refers to the politically sensitive realm in which social workers have to conduct their supportive activities for URMs. Their work needs to be morally critical and therefore by definition is “political.” We hope further research will forthcome in the field of “the social quality of living circumstances of refugees” in transit within and across European borders.

Finally, while our research does not offer a countrywide account of the treatment of URMs, it does highlight bridges and barriers to social quality. It furthermore speaks volumes about the realization of principles of human dignity, social justice, solidarity, and equal value that either impede or enhance opportunities to sustain an acceptable level of social quality. Our research evidence highlights tensions between these universally accepted moral principles on the one hand, and current policy discourses and realities of migration experiences on the other. These tensions should be a point of departure for continuing research.
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