

## **Childhoods behind bars**

### **1. Introduction**

In my paper, I focus on the living conditions of the children, who live in the modern -so called- Closed, Controlled Centers, where the vast majority of refugee families are currently housed throughout Greece, and I will examine how those conditions affect the possibility of their regular school attendance. I set off from the assumption that the specific spaces in practice function as "heterotopias of crisis" (Vidler et al., 2014) and that as such, they play a central role in the reproduction of the multi-level deprivation and social exclusion experienced by the specific children. On the course of my analysis, I adopt a relational approach and therefore, I argue that those children's well-being is inextricably linked to their families' overall living conditions, as they are shaped in the current, migration governance context.

Therefore, I suggest that as far as the accompanied children are concerned, any situation that leads to the moral and material extermination of their parents is bound to affect their living standard and to strain their mental balance, by undermining thus their overall well-being.

I base my argumentation on empirical data, since that for the last seven years I have been serving public education as a Refugee Education Coordinator, by working in two of the three refugee mass accommodation camps that operate in the Epirus region. Meanwhile, the exchange of experiences and concerns with other colleagues, who work in similar structures throughout Greece, as well as the study of a series of reliable reports, published by organizations that oppose the policies of "Fortress Europe" and defend the social and political rights of refugees, allowed me to collect information and to compare the corresponding conditions in a larger part of the country.

### **2. The numbers**

As far as the numbers are concerned, in order to get an idea of the order of magnitude, let us say that according to the most recent, overall, accounting data of UNICEF, in May 2023 there were 21,820 accompanied and 1,675 unaccompanied and separated children living in Greece, out of which approximately 17,621 (i.e., a rough 75%) were of school age. On the 01.01.2024, a total of 15,134 refugee children of all nationalities appeared to be registered in morning and afternoon classes at both, the primary and the secondary education grades on the panhellenic, school network platform.

However, although that size seems rather satisfactory, taking into consideration the constant renewal and resettlement of refugee populations, as well as the fact that many people casually lack most of the necessary certificates for their transactions with government services, in practice far fewer children manage to reach the classrooms and, above all, to study

unhindered. That phenomenon can only be adequately explained if we shed light on the sequence of factors that determine their daily lives in their places of residence, before they even reach the school threshold.

### **3. From the trauma of border crossing, to incarceration and detention**

Starting from the first reception procedures, the children we meet in the Greek refugee camps are arrested as unwanted arrivals immediately after their traumatic experiences while crossing the border and are taken (mainly) to the 5 existing Reception and Identification Centers of the Greek border line, where they remain confined together with accompanying adult parents or guardians, until they are identified and recorded. After the completion of this process, the processing of their requests begins, which marks the lifting of the ban on their exit from the detention centers as such, but the enforcement of a geographical restriction that prohibits them from leaving the area of their first registration and residence. During this first, time period a vulnerability profile of all individuals is first created. Those who become identified as particularly vulnerable are moved as a matter of priority from the border Reception and Identification Centers (GR: KYT) and the Controlled Accommodation Centers (GR: ΚΕΔ), to the Controlled Temporary Accommodation Structures for Asylum Seekers (GR: ΕΔΠΦΑΑ) on the mainland.

### **4. The children's constant uprooting and objectification**

Provided the fact that in practice, all refugees are forcibly transferred to the locations where the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum declares vacant positions in the various temporary accommodation structures throughout the country, and indeed with a frequency commensurate with those structures' opening and closing, the subjects cannot in fact influence most of the developments concerning their lives (they lose control over their own lives). That condition also results in the repeated uprooting of refugee children from their successive living environments, shortly after they begin to adapt, ultimately reducing the "significant others", who accompany them to their only stable reference point and to the main factor in their personal identity- and emotional security- building, in the face of constantly fluid givens.

### **5. The automated birth- and death of the digital self and the ever-suffering body**

Gradually and with the help of digital technology, persons are transformed into case numbers, which are then linked to a series of services temporarily entitled to their physical, human existences, as long as their individual asylum claims are actively appearing in the digital management system of the of undesired migration, that is, before they receive either a positive or a negative answer. These so-called "benefits" include:

➤ firstly, the established financial aid for each family with a maximum limit of €210 per month (for four members or more), where it is estimated that the

needs of the children are covered with approximately €25 per head and in any case, with no more than €75 for all minor family members. This amount represents the partial assistance that refugee families receive in the vast majority of camps, where in addition to accommodation, feeding is now also provided (P.D. 115202/2021 – Gazette 3322/B/26-7-2021).

- Secondly, the feeding of the people, for the most part, through – admittedly – very low quality – rations distributed by private companies, which have undertaken the catering contract.
- Thirdly, housing them in plastic containers or in large, plasticized tents (rub halls) within the various types of closed, controlled facilities.
- Fourth, the access of minors to the public education system of the country, given that they are required to enroll in compulsory school classes and
- Fifth (in theory at least), everyone's access to the public health system.

In practice, however, some of these benefits remain sham, as they simply become inaccessible, either due to the successive malfunctions displayed by the digital governance platforms, or due to the immigration policy which determines that the beneficiaries' digital entities are automatically, (de)activated "at the push of a button" -so to say-, depending on the outcome of their individual asylum claims.

Last but not least, they remain unreachable due to the severe understaffing of all levels of social services in health care personnel, social scientists and educators.

Thus, in modern refugee camps we find proportions of service provision reminiscent of corresponding demographics in so-called third-world countries, such as, for the most part, a complete lack of general practitioners and pediatricians, one midwife for at least 300 women, two to three nurses for every about 500 people, a similar number of social workers and psychologists for the same amount of an extremely troubled population, as well as small training groups of the various NGOs that attempt to cognitively and psychosocially strengthen a total student population of usually more than 100 children, sending two or three people from their staff in the field only some of the days of the week, for a maximum of six hours at a time. Exceptionally, in the larger inland structures with a population of more than 1500-2000 people, we may however meet one\*one professional visiting\*visiting doctor once a week. At this point, I have to emphasize that all of the above try to carry out their tasks mostly under precarious conditions, with short-term contracts and with minimal infrastructure and equipment, a fact which objectively does neither allow them to even develop their know-how, nor to invest emotionally in their work, in order to achieve the best, possible results.

## **6. Healthcare**

Especially, regarding the right to health care, the institutional racism hidden in the labyrinths of the "smart" bureaucracy disables the "Temporary Alien Health and Insurance Number" (GR: PAAYPA) after issuing both a negative (rejection)- and a positive decision (admission) in individual asylum requests. In the first case, the persons' individual health insurance number remains deactivated until an appeal or subsequent request is submitted, while in the second case, until the transition from their temporary social security status to the Social Security Registration Number (GR: AMKA) available only for Greek citizens and foreigners with longer residence permits.

In combination with the aforementioned absence of pediatricians, as well as general practitioners from most refugee camps throughout the country, this phenomenon results in the accumulation of critical medical cases that cannot be cured and to the de facto dereliction of people with disabilities. With regard specifically to accessing the common good of education, that kind of insufficient care provision implies the inability of us RECs to enroll a greater number of children in the nearby schools, since that the lack of an initial assessment of their health status does neither allow for the completion of the vaccination program required for their educational integration, nor for the issuing of the Individual Student Health Cards (GR: ADYM) that they must possess, so that they can participate in sports and in further events organized by their school communities.

The above problems are exacerbated by the lack of regular, free transportation from the refugee camps to the hospitals, to serve the increased care needs of those residing there (as well as to the police stations and/or the asylum offices per prefecture and region, for their legal support). As the long distances that those families have to travel to reach the necessary health facilities, combined with the meager aid that they receive still make the use of public transport prohibitive, the children's critical health needs often remain unmet for longer time periods, with the ultimate consequence of hindering their inclusion in the official educational system.

## **7. Living conditions: the modern refugee camp as a concentration of multiform violence**

In particular, during the last couple of years, every time, where the children come out of the refugee camps containers, they face three-meter concrete walls that surround their living spaces. Those walls, which are also armed with double, barbed, NATO type- wire (with razor blades, at the top), prevent their gaze from reaching the natural environment. Furthermore, inside some of the camps, a kind of large steel clusters have been constructed, that is, a type of larger cages, armed on the outside with barbed wire coils that contain smaller, similar cages on the inside, which house specific functions (e.g., asylum interviews, security services, cleaning, etc.). As such, they resemble structures for the containment of wild animals, rather than spaces for public

and social functions aimed at supporting vulnerable and traumatized populations.

In addition, in all types of refugee camps, numerous surveillance cameras are gradually being installed both around the perimeter and inside the walls, while remote-controlled flying vehicles (drones) are also available that record the movements of the -so-called- "beneficiaries" [!] from the air. Finally, the passage between the "inside and the outside world" is made through turnstiles, verification, personal, biometric data (by taking a magnetic fingerprint) and after thorough baggage checks carried out by security officers, every time, where anyone - including children - crosses those facilities' geographical boundaries.

With regard to the border island camps in particular, the organization for the Support of Refugees in the Aegean (RSA) also testifies in its recent report that in the case of the CCC (KED) of Kos, similar security fences even inside that structure demarcate separate accommodation areas for those, who are at the stage of the primary asylum request from those who are at that of their appeal or of a subsequent request, while the detention area for those who have been deemed deportable, or the so-called "safe zones" (alternatively, "safe areas " and "safe spaces") available for the unaccompanied minors' accommodation are in any case separate, "thorny" housing complexes. Those units' spatial separation with turnstiles and electronic card readers contributes to the immobilization of people, who for various reasons lack of active asylum seeker cards, within their containers' perimeter (ibid, 2023).

It therefore becomes obvious that within those closed and iron fenced facilities that have been created far from the cities' fabric, the refugee children are isolated both from their settled peers and from the wider social environment and are stigmatized as social outcasts, since that on the one side, they can't participate in the local, social becoming, and on the other, it is also highly improbable that they will receive any visits from members of the local communities, once that even if those "external" people want to visit them in this repulsive environment, they will each time have to request prior entry clearance from the administration, in order to be able to access those techno-militaristic ghettos' perimeter.

In there, they are also forced to coexist for longer periods of time with numerous, disparate people, who have also been coerced to live in there, and who do not have the time to develop meaningful, community bonds among them. In fact, sometimes, they are even forced to live together with aggressive strangers within the same few square meters, since the appropriate ratio of residents per one-room container is four people, while for each two-room container respectively, eight. We realize that this condition, which makes it impossible for those who live there to enjoy even basic privacy, also deprives the children of the opportunity to get enough rest and study their school subjects in peace.

## **8. School transfers and the staffing of the morning and afternoon *Integration Priority Zones (ZEP & DYEP)***

In addition, the beginning of each school year usually finds those isolated students without the ability to travel between their place of residence and their schools of enrollment, once that in order to run new bus routes between these longer distances, an appropriate planning- and the corresponding financing must be made in time. However, on the permanent pretext of the refugee populations' demographic fluidity in each region, those organizational actions are almost never accomplished in time. Thus, the longer distance in which the controlled centers lay from the nearest local communities and from the larger, neighboring cities complicates further the young refugees' ability to receive formal education. Combined with the established delays in the morning and the afternoon Reception Departments opening, due to the -so-called- Priority Educational Zones (GR: ZEP) and the Refugee Education Reception Structures (GR: ΔΥΕΠ) staffing of almost exclusively with substitute teachers hired on the second and the third phase of the relevant credits' distribution, those children who perhaps need most of the pedagogical and psychosocial support end up entering the classrooms for the first time with teachers who deal with them several weeks or even months after the start of the school year and even that, for a few hours per day at a time.

## **9. Nutrition**

With regard to the children's nutrition in those modern Greek refugee camps, a series of recent, reliable publications, and mainly the residents' own testimonies document the inappropriateness of the meals distributed by the catering companies that have undertaken the task of food provisions (GCR, 2021; Parallaxi, 2022; RSA, 2021). Despite the poverty and the destitution that many of those living there declare to experience, due to their general, social depreciation and weakening, the phenomenon is observed that many portions end up intact in the garbage bins. The fact that this is moreover happening even in the current situation, where families no longer have the means to provide for their own food, since that from the first of October 2021 the already meager aid they received was halved, indicates those rations very poor quality or /and their incompatibility with the individuals' eating habits. Meanwhile, according to a four-year plan, starting from the same date, the amount of 102,773,050 euros per year (excluding VAT) has started being channeled to private companies, so that they can prepare and distribute those tenths of thousands of low-quality food portions (The Nautemporiki, 2021). At this point, I wish to remind you that both the recognized- and the rejected refugees, who are still living in those facilities, lose access both, to food and to financial assistance after their institutional status change, that is, after their requests' recognition- or rejection, with the sole exception of minors, who are still entitled to those portions.

Thus, families as a whole are driven to systematic malnutrition, since that all of their members have to share between them the children's meal portions, in

order to appease their hunger. Often, Reception Classroom teachers report that refugee pupils go to school visibly hungry. Therefore, the former try to meet the latter's nutritional needs through individual initiatives, i.e. through small treats, which they pay for from their personal budget.

Under such existential insecurity conditions, it is not surprising why many of the refugee teenagers are forced to accept whichever livelihood "solutions" are offered in the surrounding areas, just like the adult ones, no matter how miserable and degrading conditions and wages those might imply. In essence, they are pushed into those "solutions", while striving to survive and to secure the necessary supplies, which will allow them to maintain their personal human dignity, and the dignity of their younger and weaker –, dependent, family members, which can't get their daily needs covered. Most importantly, they strive to gather some of their upcoming move expenses to reach their next migratory destination, since that typically, everyone is ordered to leave the temporary accommodation provided by the Greek state no later than one month after the delivery of any kind of decision on their asylum requests.

### **10. The teenagers' undeclared work**

As I mentioned above, according to the official rhetoric, the digitization of administrative procedures, combined with the closed and permanently controlled nature of modern refugee camps guarantee the effective protection of all those "hosted" there from exploitation and ill-treatment. However, it seems that the installation of modern surveillance systems and the hiring of more and more security personnel can neither suppress the incidents of violence and sexual abuse that take place against children and women within the walls, nor eliminate the kind of "survival prostitution" that flourishes around those modern ghettos, as the sole means of livelihood for those who have nothing to sell but their natural-born capital. Furthermore, it cannot even prevent the exploitation of teenagers by employers looking for undeclared, impersonal and underpaid labor to perform heavy and unhealthy manual tasks, even though the relevant institutional framework theoretically prohibits the labor exploitation of children, since that the article 32, in the fifth part of the "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU" entitled "Solidarity" states the obligation of the authorities to protect young people from "...economic exploitation or from any type of work that could harm security, their health, their physical, mental, moral or social development or endanger their education' (Official Journal of the European Union, 2007).

### **11. Protection of children and support of single parents**

Obviously, the above conditions affect the children of single-parent families more strongly, as the need of their parents to earn a living, combined with the absolute responsibility they bear for their children's upbringing creates a series of impasses: in principle, the impasse of caring for them for extended hours, where they are employed in various, precarious jobs, as there is no proper support infrastructure within the camps. Thus, in many cases, the elder

daughters shoulder the burden of caring for their younger (but sometimes even for their older) siblings, as they are forced to take on the maternal role, even from their early adolescence, i.e. as early as the age of 11 or 12 years old. That situation, which is considered "force majeure" and/or "necessary evil", embodies a set of traditional understandings about the girls' and the women's roles and reinforces their social disadvantage by depriving them of the opportunity to be educated and socialized beyond their family environment.

Furthermore, due to the gender-based violence and/or sexual abuse incidents that occasionally take place in those Centers, some of the camp administrations prohibit single-parents from leaving the perimeter unless they are accompanied by all their minor family members. At that point, I must again emphasize that this condition applies strictly to single mothers, whereas when the matter is about single fathers, this improvised regulation is applied more flexibly, especially if there is a teenage daughter left behind, taking care of all the rest of her siblings. This is how the tragic paradox appears that in the name of "child protection" teenagers, and especially teenage girls, are excluded from education [!], while sometimes all minors\* are even forced to accompany their mothers for many hours in places of hard and unhealthy work. We therefore understand that the only thing that ends up being understood as "protection" within the refugee camps premises is the on-site presence of private security personnel (security) on a twenty-four-hour basis, while in cases where children are walking around alone and unsupervised there, the blame for the "neglect of minors" is again imposed as "individual responsibility" on the single parent, who is struggling for family survival.

## 12. Conclusions

In nowadays Greece, the vast majority of refugee children are forced to grow up in Closed, Controlled Centers characterized by the materiality of deprivation, the spatial planning of isolation and where "protection" is implemented as constant surveillance and policing. The living conditions there limit all individuals' possibility of self-determination and social outcome to a minimum and also expose the children to multiple forms of widespread - aesthetic, psychological, economic, social and political - violence that affects their well-being and threatens their mental balance. Those modern refugee camps, where investments in pharaonic, techno-militaristic projects of control and repression are in excess, while health personnel, social scientists, educators and interpreters are lacking, are "privileged" fields for the exercise of institutional racism embodied by the bureaucracy of immigration governance and at the same time, fields of experimentation for the most extreme neoliberal policies, which - among other things - result in the stripping of children of their rights and the channeling of most teenagers as an "invisible" labor force in local production. Thus, they make the public good of their education, which remains virtually the only one not directly intertwined with their residency status, look like an elusive dream and a luxury, gradually



naturalizing their "class inferiority" and ultimately pushing them with mathematical precision on the fringes of society.

Therefore, if we, as public-school instructors, aim at the educational and social inclusion of young refugees, it is not enough to elaborate our pedagogical and teaching approaches and develop our intercultural skills exclusively within the educational context. Rather, we should totally and critically oppose the functioning of these modern ghettos that fundamentally undermine the living standards of these children and irreparably weaken their vulnerability. Controlled Centers of all kinds must therefore be closed because they destroy the present and the future of all the children who live in them. The struggle to implement housing policies for all refugees in the urban fabric that include support structures for the social integration of children and families at the micro-level of the school and the neighborhood emerges as an imperative "in the "here and now". Especially in an aging country like Greece, we are in great need of the youthful vitality and of the cultural wealth that all those wonderful, nimble and resilient young creatures represented. Provided that we already live in an area of the world that is still prosperous, we must and can restore their human dignity by keeping them close to us, beside us and with us.

There is no doubt that we, as educators should ensure a friendly school environment for all children from disadvantaged social groups. However, no substantial change is going to occur in the given situation if we do not speak out loud about the other parameters that make the life of refugee families unlivable, before their children even reach the school threshold and that condemn them to remain social outcasts.

Hence, my personal suggestion is that the first easy step we can all take in the direction of unveiling a creeping fascism is to call a spade a spade: a refugee camp is basically a camp, not just a "center", a "scout camp, a holiday camp" or generally and vaguely "a structure". The food that refugee families receive is an alimony like in times of war and not "catering", like in a party or a conference. We must dare to articulate the words that demonstrate that there is a social war, where refugees are considered an external and internal enemy at the same time, and that humanitarian sensitivities towards children and vulnerable people and limits to brutality do not apply in war.

Let's all not "just do our own jobs" and let us all "not just mind our own business" because fascism is nesting in indifference, conformity and individualization.