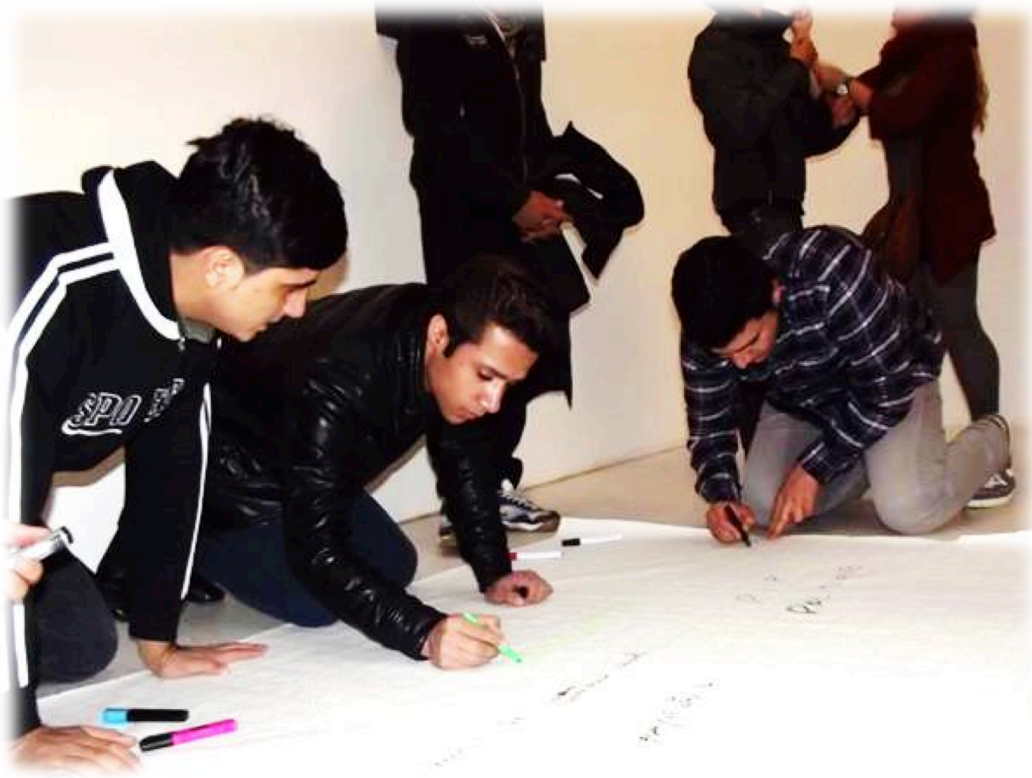


Disputed Lives ***supporting unaccompanied Afghan*** ***refugees in British schools***



LOVE TO LEARN is a project based in Battersea working with children and young people from refugee backgrounds and their families and carers. We provide learning support, educational advocacy and casework to facilitate rights and access to education and learning opportunities.

This paper has been produced to highlight the situation of unaccompanied Afghan refugees in British schools and the challenges that they face, with a view to increasing understanding amongst service providers and educators. We hope that it will help inform approaches to working with unaccompanied Afghans in the classroom.

KEY POINTS FOR EDUCATORS

- The majority of newly-arrived young Afghan refugees have travelled to the UK unaccompanied by their parents – they are therefore isolated and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Boys are often chosen to travel to Europe because their fathers have been killed and they are the eldest male in the family.
- Journeys to the UK are long and dangerous, lasting many months or even years. Young people frequently experience or witness traumatic events, such as injuries, abuse and violence, or death. They are also living with constant anxiety and fear of being caught, detained and deported, which has a substantial impact on mental health.
- As a result of their experiences, unaccompanied young people from Afghanistan experience high rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the symptoms of which may be interpreted as having a poor attitude to school work.
- Most young Afghan refugees arrive in the UK with either minimal or no previous schooling, or schooling which differs significantly from that of British state education. Many will have to learn to read and write in English without literacy in their mother tongue.
- Many will have their age disputed – there is a tendency to assume young people are older than they claim, but children can seem older due to difficult life experiences, and techniques for measuring age are unreliable. More importantly, although young people may portray themselves as robust and experienced, they are also children who have been denied a childhood – they may appear mature in some areas, but undeveloped in others.
- The majority will engage in drawn-out legal processes to claim asylum. Most will ultimately be required to leave the country by the age of 17 ½. This causes ongoing anxiety, inability to settle, and a feeling of living ‘in limbo’.
- Expectations placed on young refugees by their families in Afghanistan compound the pressures of their asylum claims and school work. Families living in extreme poverty and the debt incurred by paying for the journey, may confer unrealistic expectations on children to find work and send money home. Returning home with nothing can bring shame on the young person.
- Home situations for unaccompanied Afghan children can be difficult. Older children may be placed in semi-independent living conditions in which they may be isolated, lonely and lack support. Foster placements can also be challenging. Young people may feel unwanted at home.
- Absences from school or failure to complete homework should be read in the context of the conflicting priorities and pressures discussed overleaf. It will nearly always be appropriate to advise their guardian to seek medical or mental health support for the young person, either via their GP or through referral to a specialist service (please see list of referral organisations at the end of this document).



Young people detained in Pagani, Greece



Afghan minors arrested during an eviction, Calais

BACKGROUND

According to Home Office statistics, more Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in the UK come from Afghanistan than any other countryⁱ.

Their experiences differ from many other refugee children, particularly those who have come to the UK accompanied by adult relatives. A combination of factors ranging from the situation in their home country, the nature of the journey across Europe, and their precarious legal status, may make settling in the UK particularly challenging.

Why are children leaving Afghanistan?

Almost three decades of conflict in Afghanistan have forced many Afghans to seek refuge abroad. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded the country and, between 1979 and 1992, more than 6 million Afghans became refugees (over a fifth of the population). Few went to Europe – most went to Pakistan or Iran. Armed conflict continued after the fall of the pro-Soviet regime in 1992 until 1996, when the Taliban took control. At this point high levels of insecurity and violence and deteriorating human rights conditions forced many Afghans to leave again. During 2001 to 2007, around 4 million Afghans returned homeⁱⁱ. Violence in the country is rising, with a 14% increase in civilian casualties last yearⁱⁱⁱ. Children are particularly vulnerable to violence and forced recruitment by armed groups. Research shows that many unaccompanied children from Afghanistan are boys whose fathers have been killed and who are the eldest (or second eldest) male in the household^{iv}. They were often faced with unmanageable economic and social responsibilities after the death of their fathers.

The journey to Europe

The decision to leave Afghanistan for Europe is commonly made by the child's parent, or in their absence, their maternal uncle or, more rarely, by the child himself (98% of Afghan UASC are male)^v. Journeys from Afghanistan to Europe typically involve paying large sums of money to smugglers to board lorries - with or without the driver's awareness - or climbing inside or under vehicles without the assistance of a smuggler.

The itinerary invariably includes travel via Iran and Turkey, spending periods in safe houses, before arriving in Greece as the first point of entry to Europe. The journey from their country of origin to Northern or Western Europe can take anything from several months to several years - often interrupted by periods of work or prison, having run out of funds to move on, or having been intercepted by the authorities.

The journey is extremely dangerous and traumatic, with the borders between Asia and Europe particularly deadly. Some who make it to Europe have seen fellow travellers drown or have had to leave injured or sick companions to die in the harsh mountainous terrain on the border of Iran and Turkey. The journey may involve boarding refrigerated or moving vehicles, placing young people at great risk of injury or even death. Over the past five years, two Afghan teenagers, aged 15 and 16, have lost their lives in Calais in the process of boarding moving lorries destined for the UK.

Young people are often victims of inhumane treatment by the police whilst they struggle to survive on the streets of Calais. This might include beatings, the use of tear gas, repeated arrests, the destruction of tents and sleeping bags, and cold water being poured over sleeping Afghan minors by the police in a bid to drive them away from the border.

"From Greece I hid between the wheels of a lorry on a ferry to Italy...It took 40 hours, with no food and only one bottle of water. It was very difficult, and I was very scared."

Guardian 29.1.10

'Abdullah spent some years working in Iran, earning money to fund the next stage of his trip. He then made his way to Turkey. From there he crossed to Greece in an inflatable dinghy. It took him four attempts before he succeeded. '

Guardian 29.1.10

"Barely 15, he went first to Pakistan, then Iran, and on to Turkey and Greece. He had no money so he stayed there "a long time", living by washing windows, then crossed into Italy from the Greek port of Patras by clinging to the chassis of a truck. After a nine-month journey he reached Paris in August, and slept for a month in the street."

BBC News 1.3.10

'Every Afghan minor who has survived the endurance test that reaching Europe entails has a story of equal parts courage and grief. Some of them are too frightened, or too traumatised, or simply too young to be able to explain the forces that have borne them here.'

BBC News 1.3.10

Mental health and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

According to one Oxford University report based on questionnaires given to 222 Afghan UASC, a third of children who completed the survey had symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)^{vi}.

PTSD manifests itself in re-experiencing the event in the form of nightmares or flashbacks; hyperarousal, making it difficult for the sufferer to relax or sleep; and emotional numbing, which may lead a child to become withdrawn and avoid discussing traumatic experiences.

In the school context, concentration difficulties and tiredness from disturbed sleep may be interpreted as a poor attitude to work, while the irritability caused by hyperarousal can be perceived as aggression and bad behaviour. Emotional numbing may mask the problem. A child experiencing PTSD may also complain of headaches, chest pains, trouble sleeping, and stomach aches^{vii}.

Previous schooling

The adult literacy rate in Afghanistan at last measure was 39%^{viii}. According to a UNHCR study of unaccompanied Afghan boys in a number of European countries, 44% of the 93 interviewees had received no schooling whatsoever^{ix}.

Schooling in the southern provinces of Afghanistan where many of the UASC originate commonly takes the form of madrassa education, where there is an emphasis on Quranic studies at the expense of most other subjects. Corporal punishment in schools is widespread.

Barriers many UASC must overcome therefore include learning to read and write without literacy in their mother tongue; adapting to the comparatively 'soft' discipline in British schools; and adjusting to the British curriculum.

Asylum cases

In the vast majority of cases, young Afghans will be permitted to stay in the UK on discretionary leave for 30 months, or up until the age of 17 ½ - whichever is the shorter. This means that when that time comes to an end, they are liable to be detained and forcibly removed from the UK. They can apply for further leave to remain, but this is usually refused^x. This can, however, be undermined by Home Office or Social Services age assessments, both of which are notoriously unreliable, Royal College of Paediatricians and Child health stating that age assessments could result a five year margin of error on either side^{xi}. Difficult life experiences, such as poverty, can affect the perception of a person's age, while *Taskeras*, the Afghan national identity document, are not accepted by the Home Office as reliable evidence of age.

Those deemed to be over the age of 17 ½ will in most cases have their asylum claims refused. In 2011, only 18% of unaccompanied asylum seekers were granted refugee status^{xii}. Many will go to ground, preferring to stay and seek work to support their families' living or medical expenses in Afghanistan. Without legal status they are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Those who have been granted leave to remain but are nearing the end of that leave may also go into hiding, drop out of school, and attempt to find work. Those permitted to remain on short-term discretionary leave will be all too aware of their friends and relatives being detained and deported, compounding stresses about their own future.

Home life

Local authorities have a duty to provide additional support to UASC under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. Each child should have a personal education plan and it is the responsibility of schools to designate a named person to co-ordinate their educational provision. If children are moved, for example, to a new foster placement, education must be in place before the move, unless it occurs in an emergency. No UASC should spend more than 20 days out of education after their arrival in the UK.

Many UASC who have been refused leave or are nearing the end of their legal status, seek work to try to send some money home. They are aware of the huge debt caused by their journey and the needs of their families. One report highlighted the shame experienced by some UASC returning to families in Afghanistan empty handed^{xiii}. An interviewee commented on a case of a boy whose father had sold the family home to finance his trip:

"..when this father sold the house...so (the son) can go to London... there is a duty and a debt there. If he comes back with nothing, they will be so angry that he has done nothing for his family."^{xiv}

Younger children may be placed in foster care, others will stay with relatives or friends, while older children may share with other asylum seekers their age. Lower rates of PTSD have been reported among young Afghans in foster care than those living semi-independently^{xv}.

DIRECTORY OF SERVICES - Services in Wandsworth

[Rhian Williams at Balham Health Team](#) (Health services for asylum seekers, refugees & homeless people in Wandsworth): 020 8700 0623

[Love to Learn](#) (We are an educational charity working with young people from refugee backgrounds, providing educational advocacy & casework, an after school club, and referrals to relevant agencies): 02075850339

[Merton & Wandsworth Asylum Welcome](#) (Casework, outreach & advocacy, youth club & tuition to young people): 020 8646 6564/07956 990 671

[Klevis Kola Foundation](#) (Services for refugee families in the borough, particularly UASC, including advocacy work, a specialist UASC caseworker, mentoring, 1:1 support, & after an school club): 0208 355 3410

National organisations

[Coram Children's Legal Centre](#)

[Children's Society](#)

[Refugee Support Network](#)

[Refugee Council Children's Services](#)

[Young People Seeking Safety](#) (Raising awareness & campaigning for the rights of refugee youth)

[Red Cross International Tracing and Message services](#) (If a young person wants to locate missing relatives)

Find out more

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Gladwell & Elwyn: 2012
- ⁱⁱ UNHCR, 2007
- ⁱⁱⁱ UNAMA & UNHCR, 2014
- ^{iv} Mougne, 2010
- ^v p29, Mougne: 2010
- ^{vi} Bronstein et al: 2012
- ^{vii} NHS: 2013
- ^{viii} Unicef: 2011
- ^{ix} Mougne: 2010
- ^x Bianchini: 2011
- ^{xi} King's Fund and Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health:1999
- ^{xii} Pinter: 2012
- ^{xiii} p29, Mougne: 2010
- ^{xiv} p29, ibid.
- ^{xv} Bronstein et al: 2012