Voices from the Front Line

Social work in shelters for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors: challenging the traditional model of social work and the call for critical and political reflexivity

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Introduction

According to Eurostat (2021), Greece received 13,995 asylum applications from unaccompanied minors between 2015 and 2020, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) overseeing the management of these migrations. Child protection services are concurrently being run by some NGOs, with social workers acting as the main point of reference for unaccompanied minors. The working conditions that such professionals face, when taken alongside anti-immigration and neoliberal policies, tend to alienate both the professionals and the ethical and value base of the profession. In this article, I will give a short overview of my personal experience as a social worker in an accommodation shelter for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors in Greece. I will give examples from my everyday working life that are confronted by critical/radical social work, followed by personal critical thoughts and questions aimed at deconstructing the rooted tendencies that lead professionals to distance their work from minors.

Background

According to both the Dublin Regulation 604/2013 and the Greek Law 4375/2016, an unaccompanied minor is ‘a person under the age of eighteen who arrives in Greece unaccompanied by a person responsible for his/her care, either by law or by the practice of the Member State concerned, and for as long as he/she is not effectively taken into the care of such an adult’. Unaccompanied minors travel long and dangerous distances, putting their lives at risk, in order to reach Europe with the
aim of beginning a new life and enhancing their future. Accommodation in shelters for unaccompanied minors is referred to as 'long-term' (UNICEF, 2019). It is widely known that upon entering the country and while awaiting a placement in a sheltered accommodation facility, minors face a wide range of human and children’s rights violations in terms of inhuman and degrading living conditions. In order for a minor to be placed in a shelter, an identification process by public institutions, services and organisations (Greek Law 4375/2016) is preceded by an additional identification process. Upon completion of such procedures, a request is sent by the authorities to the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors (ΠΔ 18/2020), which secures a placement for the minor and informs the respective accommodation facility. Until 2020, responsibility for the implementation of this procedure lay with the National Centre for Social Solidarity of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity.

According to the National Centre for Social Solidarity (2019), approximately 5,301 unaccompanied minors were residing in Greece by the end of 2019, with 1,045 unaccompanied minors living in risk-bearing conditions. In the year 2019, the total number of accommodation placements deemed suitable for unaccompanied minors was 1,488 places in shelters/protective apartments and 841 places in the safe zones of camps/hotels. In comparison, the official figures in December 2020 were reported as 4,027 unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in Greece, with 1,949 available places in shelters/protective apartments and 1,505 placements in safe zones/hotels (National Centre for Social Solidarity, 2020). However, a significant delay has been observed with regard to transferring minors from ‘protective custody’ and short-term accommodation to such shelters and protective environments. As highlighted by Human Rights Watch (2020), extensive periods in ‘protective custody’ in prisons has harmful impacts on minors and also contradicts international human rights standards, children’s rights and the best interest of the child.

Between October 2019 and October 2020, I served as a social worker in a shelter for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. The shelter was under the supervision of a Greek NGO and the programme was co-funded by the European Union (EU) and the National Program of the Asylum, Immigration and Integration Fund. The shelter hosted boys between the ages of 13 and 18 regardless of their country of origin. Syrian, Palestinian, Afghani and Pakistani boys were living under the same roof. The maximum number of minors was 36 and the shelter employed a total of 17 people, including two social workers, two psychologists and a coordinator.

In the name of bureaucracy

Among other responsibilities as a social worker in a shelter for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, the pressure to adhere to bureaucratic processes and managerialism was high. As emphasised by Ferguson and Lavalette (2013), neoliberalism has a dramatic impact on individual social workers’ practices and the profession as a whole. NGOs could not have been developed with the absence of the neoliberal reform given the effort required to manage the refugee ‘crisis’ (Maniatis, 2018). Social workers, who are in the front line of this so-called ‘crisis’, are tasked with providing sufficient support to their ‘beneficiaries’, while also complying with ever-increasing bureaucratic obligations. As a means of coping with the pressure of this employment environment, work with minors was temporarily frozen. At the same time, our work reminded us of
the tensions between professionalism and funding. The frustration was obvious, but it was still a tainted responsibility. I have personally been asked to cut off meetings with minors in order to send documents to the financial management committee. This example illuminates the importance of managing and funding versus social workers’ commitment to their ‘beneficiaries’.

Confronting minors’ unpleasant behaviours

In addition to the administrative requirements outlined earlier, social workers were also expected to ‘regulate’ minors’ ‘unwanted’ behaviours in the shelter. More often than not, efforts to ‘control’ such behaviours were centred around manipulating minors’ perceptions of the degree of effort social workers would invest in advocating for their legal or family reunification case should they display unwanted versus acceptable behaviours. As social workers, we are aware that the right to family reunification and the right to family life and unity are granted equal protection across international, regional and domestic legislation. Defending human rights and human dignity is also a paramount responsibility of the profession. The aforementioned ‘regulatory’ role designated to social workers (which is transfused by NGOs, co-workers, states and the neoliberal system) hides not only a deep stereotypical role behind social work as a profession, but also the historical and political origin of the profession in Greece. As Ioakimidis (2012) claims, social work in Greece was a product of the socio-political situation during the civil war between 1946 and 1949, leading to the promotion of oppressive and corporative practices.

The questions that arise from this discussion are:

1. Can truly anti-oppressive social work be practised under the pressure of a high-demand workplace, or is an element of manipulative practice intertwined with such settings?
2. Do we reflect critically upon the impact of context when acknowledging minors’ ‘unwanted’ behaviours, or do we lay the responsibility for such behaviour solely on the ‘beneficiary’ themselves?

It is worth noting that social workers could view their ‘users/beneficiaries’ as manipulators, thus impacting upon professionals’ emotions (Satyamurti, cited in Teloni, 2011) and promoting individualistic explanations of the minor’s situation. Characterising a minor as a manipulator, despite their young age, is not such a rare occurrence. Anti-immigration policies, securitisation processes related to national and EU policies and media and politicians’ views have an impact on the relationship between social workers and minors (Teloni, 2011; Poulopoulos, 2014; Teloni and Mantanika, 2015). Grounded in my experience, it is important to mention that this kind of characterisation was used/produced not only by social workers, but also by some of the general staff. Furthermore, in the case of Greece, the chronic absence of immigration policy, the existence of a trade union model of public administration and the frequent amendment of laws and services produce and perpetuate unrest among refugees and professionals (Christopoulos, 2020). Consequently, this negatively impacts upon professionals’ perception of and interaction with their ‘beneficiaries’. In other words, socio-political factors affect social work practice, which, in turn, results in a lack of understanding regarding the roots of systems of oppression. From this, a need for critical reflection emerges to effectively respond to oppression, social change
Implementing their ‘personal choices’

Promoted by political rhetoric and inherent in the minds of the public is the belief that refugees and immigrants will one day leave Greece to seek a better life in North-Central Europe (Christopoulos, 2020). This ‘they will leave at some point’ mentality serves to garner hope among members of public administration, civil society and refugees themselves, while concurrently suggesting that ‘the obligations of the public administration are limited’ (Christopoulos, 2020: 141). Could the aforementioned mentality possibly restrict refugees from claiming their rights to any part of the social division that belongs to them, as they will leave soon?!

An illustration of this can be observed in our work with minors or, more precisely, in the high rate of unaccompanied minors absconding from their placements in shelters. According to Gkioka and Biswas (2017: 4) from ‘2012 to 2016 between 13% and 33% of unaccompanied minors absconded within the first 24 hours of arriving at a shelter’. Based on my own work experience, during the first four months, a total of 33 minors left the shelter. According to the minors themselves, one of the most prominent reasons behind leaving a shelter is their desire to continue their long journey to reach another European country, often in the hope of being reunited with other family members residing there. Additionally, the lack of opportunities and accompanying difficulties faced by asylum seekers/refugees/immigrants in Greece emboldens individuals to make the decision to flee the country. Moreover, the lengthy asylum and family reunification procedures under the Dublin III Regulation reinforce absconding (see Gkioka and Biswas, 2017; GNCHR, 2019; Teloni et al, 2020). Delays in registration procedures not only impact upon legal proceedings, but also expose minors to homelessness and humiliating conditions of living. Ad hoc law and anti-immigration policies also foster intense and persistent fears of deportation, resulting in minors considering other options, such as fleeing. Consequently, there are structural reasons boosting and forcing minors to abscond. Sometimes, the inability of NGOs or local communities to support the social inclusion of children can also lead to absconding. We have also observed that the absence of infrastructure and the inability of minors to access their rights to rest, leisure and free participation in cultural life act as a burden on their stay in shelters.³

Absconding is a phenomenon that increasingly exposes minors to danger and insecurity. When interpreted by NGO staff as an act of ‘personal choice’, such perceptions strengthen an absence of critical thinking around the structural and institutional reasons behind absconding, while diluting the ability of professionals to remain self-critical in their work. Since minors are leaving the shelter due to personal choice, what could professionals have done to prevent them from doing so?

The ‘ungrateful’ people

Viewing a minor absconding as a ‘personal choice’ to flee despite the ‘safe and protected environment’ in which they reside can also foster feelings of ingratitude among professionals, with individuals becoming frustrated when their work efforts are eradicated by the minor’s departure. Bringing the word ‘ungrateful’ into the aforementioned context brought questions to mind around how to interpret this
label. Does being ‘ungrateful’ mean that if you do not enjoy access to your human rights, you have no right to defend them? Could someone be called ‘ungrateful’ for claiming their human dignity and rights?

Conclusion

National and EU anti-immigration policies, in synergy with the media, have a major impact on unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors and the people who work with them. Moreover, national policies in Greece, which are an implementation of EU policies, systematically violate refugees’ rights and labour rights. The neoliberal context in which social work exists strongly influences the beliefs and approaches of social workers. Moreover, the behaviours and actions of minors tend to be interpreted as ‘personal decisions’, which exposes them to heightened levels of risk, while frustrating the professionals working with them. This type of interpretation often lacks critical reflection and accurate identification of the systemic and structural causes of those decisions. Social work, by definition, safeguards human rights and aims at social change. Social workers should identify those elements and reasons that instrumentalise unaccompanied minors’ lives. They should recognise the impact of the political context on children and what are seen as their ‘personal choices’ and ‘failures of social workers’. Critical reflection, information, (often) informal supervision and participation in movements and professional associations can slowly challenge the discourses that reinforce the ‘management’ of the refugee issue.

Notes
1 See, respectively: ‘European Parliament and Council No. 604/2013 of 26 June 2013 concerning establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the member state responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the member states by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast)’ (available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:en:PDF); and ‘Greece: Law No. 4375 of 2016 on the organization and operation of the Asylum Service, the Appeals Authority, the Reception and Identification Service, the establishment of the General Secretariat for Reception, the transposition into Greek legislation of the provisions of Directive 2013/32/EC[Greece]’, 3 April 2016 (available at: www.refworld.org/docid/573ad4cb4.html).

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Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.
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