

My name is Panagiota Kanellopoulou and I am a lawyer working with unaccompanied minors for the past 3 years.¹

In my experience one of the main challenges faced by UAM is the issue of housing. They arrive in Greece, yet don't immediately have somewhere to stay. Even when homeless, they frequently have to wait for 10 days, a month, even a year to be placed in suitable accommodation. In the meantime, they are forced to sleep in parks or stay with unknown adults who ask for something in exchange in order to accommodate them. More frequently, this can mean paying € 5 per night in exchange for a roof or contributing to house chores in exchange for a plate of food. There are much worse types of exchanges as well, yet very few alternatives.

The lack of emergency accommodation further compounds this issue. Throughout the years, I have witnessed many children asking for help to find a roof. You are at the organisation's office and suddenly, an unaccompanied child comes and tells you "I don't have where to sleep tonight" or "I am sleeping in a park, where can I go? Please take me somewhere to stay!". Yet there is no place to take him or her to ensure they can remain safe, at least, for the night, aside from 'protective custody', which in the case of children below the age of 14 can take place at children's hospitals. If you are girl, things are even more difficult, as 'protective custody' can only take place in facilities with adult women.

Under these conditions, how can you possibly prepare a minor for their adult life? In order to learn the language, enrol in training activities and have any prospects to find work upon majority, you have to first ensure that unaccompanied minors have secured their basic needs; that they are able to have a dignified roof over their heads, food and clothes, and legal documents that can provide them with a sense of security and predictability! Otherwise, they won't be able to focus on or have an appetite for education. Yet there is always what feels like an indefinite wait.

Amongst the first Greek words an unaccompanied minor learns is "papers, papers, papers", really just anything in order to be able to reside legally in Greece. Yet there are huge delays before they can acquire such documents, particularly when they are not considered *prima facie* refugees, due to their nationality. I have had cases of children who had to wait for 8 months or even a year, just for their asylum claim to be registered and then up to another 3 years until their asylum interview. I have even had cases whose applications were rejected and then had to wait for up to another year for their appeal to be examined. By this time, they had reached majority, and if they were boys, they suddenly fell under the so-called category of 'single, healthy, young man', which overall have the least chances of being granted asylum.

I have seen all this waiting compounding the traumas that most unaccompanied children experience either way, because they are children who have been forced to learn to live in the here and now; to focus on their survival, rather than their future. And if they have a family back home that they feel they need to support, this constant waiting further compounds their anxiety. This also ties, perhaps, with our preparedness as societies to understand the issue at

¹ Interview taken in September 2020 and partially updated in May 2021

hand; perhaps also with stereotypes. We tend to hear the word “unaccompanied minors” and expect to see a ‘poster child’, rather than an adolescent who may also be anxious to find work. We tend to forget that, despite their age, we are still discussing about children, who upon reaching majority, are still in need of support to be able to move forward with their lives.