

Seeking safety, many refugee kids sacrifice education in new homeland

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Image 1. Portrait of a young boy through the fence of the football field at Eleonas Refugee Camp in Athens, Greece. Photo by: Pierre Berthuel / Barcroft Media via Getty Images

ATHENS, Greece — Sixteen-year-old Abdul Rashid left Afghanistan three years ago and has been living in Greece as a refugee ever since. Yet, he has received no education since arriving and will attend school for just the first time in Greece this month.

He says he expects it to be a struggle, especially given the language barrier.

"It's very important to learn the language of the country you're living in," Abdul said in English. "So now I'm learning Greek. But it's very difficult. It's very different from our language."

As parents and kids return to school in Greece, thousands of children who arrived in the Mediterranean country during the refugee crisis that began in 2015 have been staying home. Some live in an apartment, house or in shipping containers in a refugee camp. More than a million refugees fled to Europe from war, terrorism and challenging economic situations in their home countries. Many risked their lives to make it to Europe.

Poor Enrollment Rates

Now, a report from the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on refugee children's education shows another concern. Four out of 10 children between 5 and 17 weren't enrolled in school in Greece. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds had the worst enrollment rate, with only four of every 10 enrolled, while only one of 10 children living on the Greek islands was enrolled in school.

Abdul, who speaks Dari and English, and is learning Greek, hadn't gone to school since leaving Afghanistan. When he first arrived in Greece he was trying to reach Germany with his family, where his brother was already living. However, he got stuck in Idomeni, a Greek town on the Macedonian border, in 2016 when the European Union shut down the free flow of migrants.



He spent a year expecting to be reunified with his brother in Germany but the reunification program, according to UNHCR numbers, has been virtually frozen this year.

Common Plight

As another year passed, Abdul didn't know he could attend public school in Greece or even how to enroll because no one provided him with that information.

His plight is common.

Half of the world's refugees are children, according to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Of those who are of school age, more than half aren't in the classroom. That means 4 million children around the world are out of school. Last year, the number of out-of-school refugee children increased by 500,000, according to the latest UNICEF report.

Integrating Kids Into The Classroom

Germany, Italy and Greece have taken the most refugees arriving in Europe. While Italy is lagging behind in processing the new arrivals or getting children into school, Germany has recognized it's a problem and tried to integrate the kids into the classroom with special help to address their unique needs. It's had mixed success so far.

In Greece, experts are hopeful more children will attend school this year. They said the Greek government's policy is now to integrate and school these children.

Even so, the Greek Ministry of Education didn't have numbers available on how many refugees enrolled in school this year.

"We're expecting an increase in the teenagers that have enrolled," said Savas Kalokairinos, a social worker for Elix, a Greek non-governmental organization (NGO) where Abdul took Greek language courses this past summer. Kalokairinos said both the ministry's education coordinators and NGOs helped refugees fill out the paperwork to enroll in school.

Elix works with 2,500 refugee children and their parents, offering them Greek, English, math and physics courses.

There are still plenty of hurdles to refugee children's education, such as teachers who don't know how to teach Greek as a second language. Also, many migrants move from place to place – from camps to apartments in different cities during the school year. Others find smugglers and continue their journey to Western Europe.

Parents often don't know how to help their children's education, either.

"Some 70 percent of the parents have never entered a school in their lives, so it's hard for them to teach their children how to behave in school," said Kalokairinos.

In Eleonas, one of the refugee camps in Athens, Fariba Khodadadi, age 9, switches from English to Greek easily and sometimes uses both languages in one sentence. Fariba looks forward to starting school this month for a second year at the 87th Public Elementary School of Athens, where her favorite subjects are math and Greek.

Kids In One Refugee Camp Will Be Starting School

Starting this month, every day, International Organization for Migration school buses will arrive at the Eleonas refugee camp to take Fariba and the 133 other kids there to nearby schools.

Fariba went to school for the first time last year in Greece. She started walking from Afghanistan to Europe with her family before she was even of school age. "It was cold, and my legs hurt," Fariba said. "I was 5 years old."

She tries to explain how her family had to leave Afghanistan because of violence. She gestures digging, placing something in the area she's dug, and then shouts "Bam!" and spreads her arms toward the sky to imitate a bomb explosion. Then she goes back to highlighting in green the vowels and in pink the consonants of a page in Greek she's found.

Teachers at the camp said NGOs like Elix have been crucial in helping kids learn.

Nevertheless, because the funding for the Elix program ends in December – European Union funds for the program will go to the Greek government – many refugees hope their experiences in Greek schools will be positive.

Abdul isn't afraid.

"I'm going to make it," said Abdul, highlighting that someday, he wants to become a journalist. "Here it's good. There's peace. In Afghanistan, we'd know that there was a war going on by looking outside our home before leaving for school. If there was no one on the streets, we wouldn't go to school that day."