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Sexual Victimization of Male Refugees and Migrants: Camps, Homelessness, and Survival Sex

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Abstract

This report focuses on sexual violence against and exploitation of males as a human rights violation committed during armed conflict or as an indirect outcome of armed conflict. It identifies the difficulty refugees and migrants experience inside refugee camps and what happens to young men and boys who are on the streets. By looking at the current crisis in Athens, Greece I expose the implications of failed policies for refugees. In addition, I challenge the world to redefine our understanding of sexual violence as a gender issue.

Keywords

Greece, Afghanistan, boys, men, refugees, migrants, camps, homelessness, survival sex, sexual exploitation

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Acknowledgements

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SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE

SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION OF MALE REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS: CAMPS, HOMELESSNESS, AND SURVIVAL SEX

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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on sexual violence against and exploitation of males as a human rights violation committed during armed conflict or as an indirect outcome of armed conflict. It identifies the difficulty refugees and migrants experience inside refugee camps and what happens to young men and boys who are on the streets. By looking at the current crisis in Athens, Greece, I expose the implications of failed policies for refugees. In addition, I challenge the world to redefine our understanding of sexual violence as a gender issue.

KEYWORDS

Greece, Afghanistan, boys, men, refugees, migrants, camps, homelessness, survival sex, sexual exploitation

RMED CONFLICT in the Middle East and Central Asia has created a flood of refugees and migrants as people are forced to flee the violence to refugee camps in other countries. The following report is about my own experience in Greek refugee camps, squats, and other areas in Athens, Greece, where I was exposed to the problem of sexual violence against boys. Most of my experiences were with Afghan refugees.

Sexual violence against girls and boys constitutes a major human rights issue. In July 2013, in a "Report of Workshop on Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys," the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence Zainab Hawa Bungura announced:

In considering the scope of the problem, the workshop highlighted examples of sexual violence against men and boys in at least 25 countries since the turn of the century, and the fact that members of armed groups and forces are themselves also vulnerable. A multiplicity of forms of such violence were highlighted, ranging from anal rape through being coerced into committing various sexual acts, to also include forms of genital mutilation. The multiplicity of possible spaces in which such violence occurs was highlighted, as was the need to be aware of the ways in which conflict-related sexual violence continues in situations of exile, as well as in what are officially post-conflict context.

Athens, Greece (2016)

Sexual violence during conflict has continued to spread across the globe, in recent years. Heinous acts by Daesh (the Arabic language acronym for Islamic State) against Yazidi women and the brutal abduction of girls from school by Boko Haram have been broadcast in international news. However, the sexual violation of males has remained under-reported. Too often, for example, the Syrian government's sexual assault of men has been buried inside the general label of torture; in countries where to simply report a rape is itself a crime, sexual violence against males is seldom mentioned. Among the current refugee and migrant populations in Greece, the sexual violation of males, often through survival sex, occurs, yet remains outside the spotlight.

In contrast to the media's silence about this criminal activity, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) have put forward current findings of sexual violence against males. Gaining awareness of sexual violence against males in conflict areas is an important first step. Noticing how sexual violence also impacts refugees and displaced migrants is also needed. Sexual violence against human beings during conflict and in its aftermath should be a global concern.



Children playing in barbed-wire area at Elliniko Refugee Camp, Athens, Greece

My own recent experiences in Greek refugee camps, squats, and other high trafficked areas in Athens exposed me to the problem of sexual violence against boys. In writing of the sexual violence problems encountered, I hope to inspire further dialogue. To provide readers with a context for understanding these boys' dire situation, I am sharing my journey as it unfolded chronologically; gradually, I became cognizant of the abuse. Since most of my interactions, both professionally and socially, were with Afghans in and outside the Greek camps, this narrative focuses primarily on their lives.

My Temporary Greek Home – Fylis Street

It took me almost a year to save enough money to travel to Greece and volunteer in the camps. In late spring, 2016, I started work in Greece with a non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO), assisting refugees in camps on the mainland and islands. I wanted to maximize my time and also live in a community where I could immerse myself in the Greek culture. I found a lovely place online and what appeared a great neighborhood close to the metro line. When I arrived, I had brought several large suitcases filled with donations, so I opted to take a taxi from the airport to Fylis. On the way, I received my first, of many, stern lectures from taxicab drivers explaining to me that my neighborhood was a "very, bad place" and that I should not "wander about on my own." I noted the advice and embraced my new home.

Over the next few weeks, I spent time becoming more familiar with my neighborhood. Due to the daily work schedule in the camps, I needed to learn to find the closest grocery store and similar places quickly. As I walked to the bus or the metro each day, I noticed white lights outside many of the houses on my street that were lit even during the day. Finding this odd, I asked waiters in Victoria Square, shop owners, and people in my building about the lights. Over and over, I heard many of the same stories and language.

Elliniko Refugee Camp

I volunteered my time in the Elliniko refugee camp, which included the old airport and the 2004 Olympic stadiums. According to the ministry to which my NGO reported, approximately 4,300 refugees resided in Elliniko: 800 in the terminal; 1,500 in the baseball stadium; and 2,000 in the hockey stadium. Although some Kurds and Iraqis lived in the camps, Afghans from six major tribes comprised the majority. About 70 percent of the Afghans originally fled to Iran where many were



The Terminal Area of the Elliniko Refugee Camp used to be an international airport (May 2016)

mandated either to fight against Daesh or face forced deportation that eventually drove them towards Europe. Most refugees attempted to return to Afghanistan only to find that the Taliban had quietly regrouped. In 2015, the Taliban probably controlled or heavily influenced about half of Afghanistan, according to *The Long War Journal*, an online publication that tracks Taliban rule.¹ I, like many of my

¹ See a map of Taliban control in Afghanistan (<u>http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/</u>world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html).

fellow Americans, was completely focused on the crisis in Syria and knew little of the current state of Afghanistan.

The morning I arrived, I boarded my 45-minute bus ride to serve breakfast at the old baseball stadium. I spent that morning working with my Dutch organization taking instructions in Greek from the ministry. What a shock it was to realize that my dismal French and my cobbled together Arabic would not help me as it had in 2014 when I volunteered in refugee camps in Beirut. I quickly learned basic necessary Farsi so that I could serve the morning meal to about 1,500 people.

I was further challenged upon learning that numerous ill or pregnant refugees had doctor notes written in Greek, which not a single volunteer was able to read. These slips contained mandatory instructions to provide additional milk, diabetic meals, etc. The lack of language skills and supplies not only placed a strain on the refugees, but also on the volunteers. Refugees would try to advocate vigorously for their families, and the volunteers would do their best to be just and fair. Sadly, good intentions could only carry us so far, and, unfortunately, the same patterns repeated when we served the dinner meal. To make matters worse, as rations such as canned milk and meat became less available, the population grew apprehensive about their future in Elliniko, causing even more anxiety throughout the camp.



Garbage blocking portable toilets at Elliniko Refugee Camp

The UN tents, the few showers, and the dwindling meals at the baseball stadium made me welcome the chance to walk half a mile and begin my next assignment at the Terminal. What I was unprepared for, though, was seeing how inhumanely people can treat each other. Gone, indeed, were the spacious, white-and-blue, canvas UN tents. Family members were piled on top of each other inside tiny tents, often sharing space with larger families. Those "lucky enough" to settle in the camp before it reached capacity were given the second level of the old Elliniko airport terminal, which provided them with meals, running water, and activities for children. What it did not provide, however, was showers. The 10 toilets (seven to eight worked, if luck was on our side) were cleaned only every seven to ten days. Garbage removal was sporadically provided. I encountered these deteriorating conditions every day in the camps. As the days went by, the temperatures increased from the mid-80s to 106 °F before it settled in at 95 °F where it remained until I left. Each

day an ambulance arrived to take away individuals who suffered from a multitude of ailments, including scabies, lice, flu, chickenpox, and tuberculosis. A makeshift sick wing near the main entrance continued to grow, shrinking the space available for children to play.



Unregistered refugees outside Elliniko Refugee Camp: this area was empty the previous month

Since the Elliniko camp was full when I arrived, the continued influx of people forced new arrivals to set-up tents outside of the official gates. As people arrived, space was prioritized, both in and outside the camp. Understandably, families, women, children, and the elderly were given first availability.



Unregistered refugees at Elliniko Refugee Camp: no access to camp services

The location presented in this picture has no electricity or running water, and no access to medical care or privacy. Finding a place to sleep at night was difficult for young males without families, whose ages ranged from 14 (or younger) to about 24. It was not long before I realized how these boys and young men without money, shelter, or family survived.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) and the Greek Ministry of Immigration (MOI)'s pre-registration data analysis, roughly 32 percent of the vulnerable population is comprised of unaccompanied

minors. Of the minors in the camp, 27 percent are males, and 80 percent of those boys are between 10-17 years of age.²

The Greek Perspective

According to the locals in the neighborhood where I lived, Fylis had rapidly descended into a place of collision between a "white light district" and "refugee alley." Kypselis and Fylis had been thriving urban neighborhoods. Artists, musicians, and many eclectic types flocked to the Kypselis neighborhood. At the same time, Fylis tended towards more "old family" wealth with a strong presence of the traditional Greek life that once thrived. Then the financial crisis struck, and over the last several years, many things changed. Now, with one in four Greeks unemployed, adult children lived with their parents; the burden of a 24 percent tax on almost everything purchased was creating a version of Greece that its people had never seen before.



Elliniko Refugee Camp, July 2016

The shopkeepers spoke of how their stores used to be full, but now they struggled just to stay open. Instead of business people meeting for lunch, migrants and refugees filled Victoria Square. Neighborhoods were littered with graffiti and trash. Fylis Street seemed hardest hit because of a particular intersection filled with brothels, whose numbers appeared to increase weekly during my time in Greece.

Traditionally, brothels were an "understood" aspect of the Greek life. Prior to the crisis and the influx of displaced people arriving in Athens, the brothels were regulated with an 18 plus age requirement, and regular sanitation checks and health requirements were in place. This slowly changed with checks becoming less frequent. The brothel across the street from my apartment had not been inspected in the previous 18 months, and girls there looked much younger than the required age. On my street, it appeared that young girls from all over the globe, but primarily Eastern Europe, were in the brothels. This surprised me because I expected to see a large displaced person population. I also never saw one Greek woman, which I

² Preliminary data, which might change based on additional data and further verification of pre-registration records. Analysis is based on 20,100 records during the period June 9 – July 5, 2016. Data Source: Asylum Service. (The sum of shares may differ from 100 percent because of rounding effects.)

thought odd. It actually is not. The brothels primarily house foreign nationals. It is very rare to find a Greek woman or girl in the local brothels.

Most of the Greek locals I spoke to were not thrilled about the additional burden of refugees and migrants, but understood the situation and were doing their best to tolerate it. A few engaged in hate speech—calling the refugees rats, bugs, and an infestation. They claimed that this population was raping women, overtaking neighborhoods, and some even believed that the migrants are attempting to overwhelm the country to force it to convert to Islam. They believed that the influx will eventually cause a holy war. Although their views were not the dominant ones among people I talked to, they made an impact. One of the shop owners near the square admitted that some grocers and restaurant owners had begun dousing the food they throw away at night with bleach to keep the refugee population from picking it out of the garbage and eating it. In addition, although I was unable to find an official report of Greek women being raped by refugees and migrants, I heard it repeated over and over on multiple occasions.

What most agree is that the European Union-Turkey deal³ put the country in an unfair and challenging position. Due to the fiscal crisis and the fact that the refugee/migrant population was already in Greece, the Greek citizens I met said that their country was not given a voice concerning the terms outlined in the deal. They think a bad situation was foisted upon them. With Brexit (the British vote to exit from the European Union), many Greeks feel even more abandoned and angry.



"White Light District," Fylis Street, Athens, Greece

The Greeks are proud people, who think of themselves as the backbone of western civilization. Though they do make errors, I believe that in general it is not due to malice. Many do not want outside assistance, but realize that they must tolerate it. To them, the appearance of order is absolutely necessary because the alternative could inspire true chaos. Their words, which resonate repeatedly with me, are, "We did not ask for this. We did not ask them to come here. We did not ask for the borders to close. But here we are, and we will make the best of it—on our terms."

³ See *Five reasons why the EU Turkey deal still is not a good idea*. https://www.nrc.no/news/2016/september/five-reasons-why-the-eu-turkey-deal-still-is-not-a-good-idea/

The Displaced Person

The food program I was working with was eventually reassigned to Greek volunteers, so I slowly began to restructure my schedule. I continued to go to the camps each day and work on activities with the kids (since formal schooling was not allowed). We focused on teaching hygiene, English and math as well as offering some daily fun such as chalk drawing and bracelet making. In the evening, I had time to begin canvasing the neighborhoods to identify what at that point I had only speculated about.

As the displaced population arrived, Greece had struggled to adapt. Many refugees had no access to the camps and their services, resulting in homeless refugees spilling over into the squares and squats. Over time, some gained entrance to a camp or housing services from local and/or international NGO's. Unfortunately, it seemed to me that single young males traveling by themselves were the least likely group to receive assistance. I became aware of this population for a multitude of reasons. First, my former research had focused on males who were sexually abused during conflict. This education assisted me in spotting exploitation of a gender group that was often unnoticed as recipients of sexual violence. Second, in the neighborhood where I lived in, I encountered young boys I had seen first at Elliniko camp going to "hot spots" for survival sex. Third, at Elliniko, I noticed some slightly older, muscular males with phones and new clothing. Later, I came across these men at two main locations—a bar and an entertainment area—on a regular basis.

With the help of two of my Afghan friends from Elliniko, I began spending time between two squares–Victoria and Omonia, meeting several individuals willing to discuss their experiences as well as the current environment for homeless males. I learned that many young men traveled to Athens on their own. Most of them had relatives already in either Germany or the Netherlands. Often their fathers had gone first to make sure that it was safe to travel. Then, the eldest son, mother, girls, and small children traveled next. Boys, often the last to leave, were usually required to travel alone. This worked in the beginning, but, as borders began to close, it became almost impossible for these boys and young men to reunite with their families. Many of them still believed that the borders would open or that they would be reunited with their families.

Regrettably, with little access to services, no money, and rarely anyone to connect with, they were befriended by slightly older males at the camps or at the squares that had provided free meals. These older men offered ways for the young person to make money and survive. At first, the youth are lured with the idea of nonsexual relations. The offer only requires dancing, accompanying another man to the movies, or possibly assisting in bathing an elderly man. Once the young men are at the clubs, cinemas, or even houses of elderly male Greeks, it is too late. Because sex with the same gender is a criminal act in many of the countries that these individuals flee, it is made clear to them what will happen if they report sexual violations to the police. Threats of deportation, arrest, and physical violence keep these victims silent. In addition, the boys are told that this is what they need to do to survive and Allah will understand.

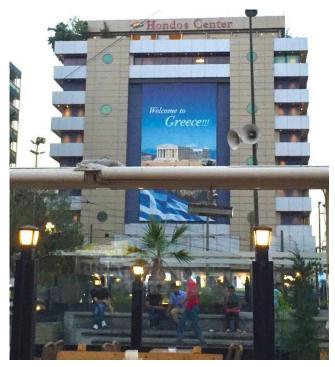
Upon hearing these reports, I decided to locate a few primary areas where the young men were sexually trafficked. I visited two separate parks where I observed a plethora of young men and even more elderly Greeks. I watched as the Greeks would walked up and down picking out a young man, as if they were picking out a cut of meat for dinner. I talked to a few of the young men, but they were uncomfortable being photographed. They stated that news coverage of the trafficking in

the park had made it difficult and even potentially dangerous for them. Since the clients were becoming increasingly nervous about getting caught, the young men were required to go further into wooded areas. I noticed the unfriendly glares from the elderly Greek men, so I took a brief walk through the park to its edges where used condoms and their wrappers littered the ground.

After several days, I was provided with two more opportunities to observe sexual exploitation scenarios. One was at a local gay bar in Athens and the other was near Omonia Square. Thursday and Saturday night were the most popular nights at the gay bar, so I make arrangements with my friends to go the following Saturday. I wanted to be prepared when I went inside, so I spent about an hour walking around the perimeter of the site. It had security cameras, but I did not believe they had been used in years. The rundown building made me wonder what kind of person could be drawn to such an eyesore. Once again, I was in for quite a surprise.

The bar opened at midnight. My women friends from the States, a refugee friend, and I went inside around 12:30 am; the place was barely filled. Though mainly an establishment for Greeks and Iranians, the occasional female American tourist with an Afghan speaking Farsi makes it through the door. We were given the eye upon entering, but, luck would have it, Persian men love my blonde hair. It was not long before one of the bouncers brought me a chair and stood by my side all night, except when he went to bring back gifts of dates and oranges.

As the night progressed, the music became louder and the club continued to fill, I slowly realized just how many faces I recognized—not only from the camp, but also from the squares, and even my own neighborhood. At first, it was mostly young guys, dressed in snug-fitting jeans, and very well groomed; they danced or talked to the older Greek men who sat on a stage-like structure, looking down on the masses.



Teen boys living in Omonia Square, Athens, Greece

I decided to dance to get a better view of what the bar entailed. At one point, I got up on stage where the elderly men sat and realized quickly that I had made a mistake. The stage was a platform for an individual to showcase his dance moves

and physique to those seated on the stage. Although I only spent a moment up there, before I was quickly yanked off, that was when I saw them. In the back corner by the wall, there were groups of much younger men. I went over and smiled at them. Not one of them would make eye contact . . . not even the boys I knew. Many stared off into the distance or at the floor. All of them looked absolutely terrified, and a few, angry.

I went back to my seat to talk, and, after a few minutes, one alert friend asked me to accompany her to the bathroom. She had already seen another part of the bar that I had missed. As we approached the restroom, I saw a young man taking money, another participating in sex acts, and another bleeding out of the corner of his mouth. It was very disturbing. To be honest, I was not sure what to do. When we returned from the bathroom, two older men, including the owner, made it clear that it was time for us to go. We finished our drinks and left.

Omonia was another prime "pick-up" location because it served as a squat for a hodgepodge of homeless males, including Bangladeshi and Pakistani men. A British lady came to the square once a day at sundown and provided them with a meal. Besides that, most of them were on their own. This left them vulnerable to many risks faced by the homeless, especially the young ones. As I sat in the square one night talking to the group, the British woman remarked how the young ones frequently did not return and she often wondered where they went. Based on this and other conversations, I visited a cinema near Omonia Square. Once again, I was confronted with young men and boys providing sexual "services" to a Greek male population. The difference here was that there were fewer boys than the men. This was due mainly to management and to older displaced males trying to "control inventory."

Over the last six months, the number of displaced males forced into survival sex has increased dramatically. Not only are there more refugees on the mainland, but also the level of desperation has increased tenfold, as money and food have run out. Due to competition from boys with "virgin" qualities, older male victims had to find a way to continue to have enough money to survive. The way to do this was to maintain the nicest facility, Sexy Cinema, for themselves. This allowed them to charge a "living" price for sex acts. When an area becomes too saturated, though, they are no longer able to maintain pricing. For example, at the local parks, sex acts are exchanged for only two to five euros. The aging male refugees say this makes their situation worse because, at lower rates, no one can save money, either to leave or to rent an apartment of his own. Everyone is living day to day . . . meal to meal.

Where Are the Services

Like most areas of the world where I volunteer, Greece has a high level of trafficking and a lack of awareness regarding male victims, while the services for this population are non-existent. Over the last two months, a small group of dedicated individuals from around the globe has reached out with me repeatedly to local and international organizations trying to find assistance for these young men. I personally contacted over thirty organizations while I volunteered in Greece. Not one service provider was able to help assist the young men in these precarious positions. Over and over again, we were told that a group either did not 1) work with males who had been sexually victimized; 2) work with males over 18; 3) have a location in Athens or anywhere close to Athens; 4) work in Greece, though they worked with males who had been sexually victimized. In writing this short account, my hope is to draw attention to the issue, leading to the necessary resources to help this group of males and also to create long term solutions to assist young men and boys in other regions that face this human rights violation. The goal is to facilitate additional conversations, assistance, and resources for a community of victims and survivors who are sexually violated in the refugee camps, squats, and other high trafficking areas in Athens, Greece.

My Final Words

Displaced populations from around the globe who are currently placed in a holding pattern are at the heart of all of this. Of the thousands of people who have traveled to find safety, shelter, and often, to flee persecution, the ones I met were always willing to offer me a glass of water, a cup of tea, or simply a space to sit. As an American, it is difficult to express in words how much this means to me. My country has not been kind to Afghanistan, and we continue to be on the wrong side of history concerning Syrian refugees. I am humbled by the people in these camps. They are the reason I am sharing this information. The refugees I met are truly amazing human beings, and I spend much of my time reflecting on how I could have done more.

Sexual violence against men and boys builds on the same gender constructs that are evident in sexual violence against women and girls. The "feminization" of men through sexual violence is an extension of the larger gender logic that informs the subordination of women. Such sexual violence is frequently used as a weapon of war with the intent of fracturing communities and reducing their capacity to resist, and gender humiliation is frequently linked to ethnic humiliation.

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Rachel E. McGinnis, Ph.D., is an interdisciplinary scholar focusing on the fields of conflict science, sexual violence, and mass atrocities. Her research focal point is sexual violence during conflict concentrating specifically on male victimization. She holds a Ph.D. in Conflict Analysis and Resolution from Nova Southeastern University (NSU), a Masters and a Bachelors of Science from the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). She currently teaches at RIT in Sociology and Anthropology and at Embry-Riddle in Security Studies and International Affairs Department. In addition, she is the Vice-Executive Secretary of the International Network of Genocide Scholars (INoGS). She has spent the last several years volunteering as a humanitarian aid worker in Northern Ireland, Lebanon, and Greece. She works with individuals who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, have experienced sexual violence, or both. Rachel works to bring awareness to local non-governmental organizations (NGO's), medical personnel, and government officials working with male refugees in the region.

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