

# Youth Partnership

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Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



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Seminar: Journeys to a New Life: Role of Youth Work in the Integration of Young Refugees in Europe, 22–24 November 2016

## **YOUNG REFUGEES AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH WORK - The Finnish perspective**

### **Introduction**

European countries faced a sizable increase in asylum seekers during 2015. The public discussion was characterised by calls for stricter border politics and immigration policies. In Finland in particular, the number of asylum seekers increased remarkably during 2015. According to the Finnish Immigration Service's data, 83 per cent of the people who arrived in Finland between January and September 2015 were under 35 years old (Laine and Suurpää 2016). Thus, the recent humanitarian immigration in Finland should be seen as a particular issue concerning the young generation, whether regarded as a political, administrative, social or personal issue. The same is true for global migration: Particularly children, adolescents and young adults are on the move across countries and continents.

Still, the debate in Finland concerning the responsibilities related to global migration is only rarely inspired by the framework of youth policy, such as intergenerational justice and equality, or young people's right to a home, meaningful engagement and participation. Rather, the public discussion around the recent immigration has been framed by fear – regarding the resources related to the Finnish authorities, the redistribution of services and money, and the recognition of newcomers as a legitimate part of the Finnish society.

This working paper is based on two studies carried out in Finland in 2016. The first study was conducted at a big, national NGO (Finnish Federation of Settlement). It concentrated on, for example, how young refugees, and specifically young asylum seekers, were welcomed into everyday youth work practices both by professionals and other young people (Bahmani and Honkasalo 2016). In the 20 interviews conducted with NGO workers around Finland, we asked what practices had been developed in the field of youth work in order to promote multiculturalism, equality and affirmative action. Most of the interviewees reported that the tension had mounted in the societal atmosphere in Finland since 2015, which manifested in everyday work becoming more demanding and threatening due to hostility and overt racism towards migrants.

The second study consisted of ethnographic fieldwork carried out at a centre for unaccompanied refugee youth in 2016. Both the young asylum seekers and professionals working with them were interviewed for this project. The research project concentrated, for example, on the everyday lives and life trajectories of the young asylum seekers.

The focus of this paper will be mainly on unaccompanied minors. An estimated 95,000 unaccompanied minors arrived in the European Union in 2015, of which 35,000 sought asylum in Sweden, 14,000 in Germany and 3,000 in Finland. Many of these children and adolescents had faced inhuman behaviour and treatment during their journey and attacks to asylum centres around Europe were reported in the media (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016).

The working paper will address the following questions:

- 1) The effects of migration policies and migration law in the contexts of youth work and youth policy
- 2) Transnational ties in the context of the leisure activities of young asylum seekers, including contact with family members and friends in the country of origin
- 3) The role of leisure time in the lives of young asylum seekers, including practices, professional assistance, friendship networks and leisure activities

**1) The effects of migration policies and migration law in the contexts of youth work and youth policy**

The most difficult circumstance in the lives of unaccompanied, young asylum seekers in Finland is that no one official authority is responsible for these young people; rather, the responsibility is scattered among different official institutions (see e.g. Honkasalo 2016). This lack of coordination and responsibility often makes the lives of young asylum seekers unpredictable and chaotic. In our fieldwork, for example, there was one young person who had been moved from one reception centre to another while awaiting the decision regarding his resident permit. This young boy stated that this translocation had been very traumatic for him, since he had been deprived of his friendship networks, school, hobbies and a safe environment. In the interview, he said that he would not wish the same destiny on any other unaccompanied minor. Furthermore, the fact that many young people, once they have received a resident permit, are moved from the reception centre to another institution is problematic, as the centre might be located in a different part of Finland. During the move, the often fragile social network that the young person has managed to build is broken. These transitions might also be frightening and cause tremendous stress.

In the current political situation in Finland, many immigration laws that affect young asylum seekers directly have been made even stricter. One example is the law regarding family reunification. Owing to the new income limits, the criteria for family ties and the fact that the process itself has been made even more difficult than before, it is nearly impossible for an unaccompanied young person to get his or her family members to Finland. Therefore, there is a growing generation of young asylum seekers for whom nearly no official institution is responsible and there is nearly no support from family networks. Furthermore, the wait for a resident permit is very long, even though the Finnish Immigration Service states that the process for unaccompanied young people should be shorter than that for other asylum seekers. In our fieldwork, some of the

young people had been waiting for their resident permit for nearly two years. Many of the interviewees stated that this time of ‘waitinghood’ was the most unbearable thing they had endured since moving to Finland. It frustrated the interviewees. Moreover, the professionals working with the youth said that the ‘waitinghood’ disturbed even the everyday rhythm because of young people’s insomnia. Therefore, it is important that we find tools for analysing the life circumstances of these children and young people in order to deepen our understanding. This, in turn, will make it possible to develop good practices and tools in order to make unaccompanied minors’ lives easier and enable them to live with dignity.

In the study focusing on the viewpoint of a Finnish NGO on how the civic society had welcomed young asylum seekers, it seemed that the new societal situation had not been discussed much at the administrative level but, instead, was addressed at the grassroots level very concretely in everyday life and practices. For example, the youth workers in Finland mentioned the worsening xenophobic attitudes especially in cities where reception centres had been opened (Bahmani and Honkasalo 2016). Some of the youth workers had even faced direct threats and did not share information of their workplace on a daily basis. However, even among the youth workers, the attitudes towards asylum seekers were not always welcoming. In some interviews, the youth workers pondered, for example, whether their youth club was meant for young asylum seekers at all, even if, by law, communal services are meant for all inhabitants of the municipalities.

#### *Recommendations for youth work practices:*

- The youth work field needs more information about global immigration and its consequences. More information is needed also about how the everyday lives of young asylum seekers are shaped and how legal changes and immigration policies affect the daily lives of young people.
- The possibility of affirmative action in relation to recruiting more asylum seekers to undertake leisure activities should be considered. In addition, knowledge of the basic rights of asylum seekers should be discussed both among youth workers and young people.
- Many interviewees said that the stereotypical media coverage of refugees directly affected the attitudes of young people visiting youth clubs, and therefore many youth workers wished for more tools based on critical media analyses.
- Youth workers also need more education about the psychological experience and effects of the asylum process and unaccompanied minors, especially in cases where family reunification is not possible or when young people risk the rejection of their resident permit application.

#### **2) Transnational ties in the context of the leisure activities of young asylum seekers, including contact with family members and friends in the country of origin**

Many of the young people that we interviewed in our second study had left their home country several years prior. Thus, the journey to Europe and to Finland was often framed with experiences in other countries. For example, many of those who were originally from Afghanistan had been living for months in transit-countries doing small jobs and staying with relatives. After arriving in Finland, they maintained contact with relatives mainly through phone calls and social media.

However, such contact and networks were often fragile and changing. Some of the young people had chosen not to be in contact with family, because of the sensitive situation or because such contact made everyday life unbearable – it reminded them of how far and in what circumstances their family members were living. Some of the young people did not know where their relatives were, and some did not bear pressure from parents (e.g. expectations of regular news, family reunification and a positive resident permit acquisition process). However, many of the youth workers that we interviewed in our other study were unaware of the fragile family ties and transnational networks of young asylum seekers.

In the context of Finnish youth work, young people's lives are often seen too rigidly in the context of the Finnish society solely, and there is a certain blindness towards transnational ties. The Finnish youth workers might also be unaware of the traumatic experiences that the young people had during their journey to Finland (e.g. relatives being killed).

#### *Recommendations for youth work practices:*

- Tools targeting transnational networks and ties should be developed in the context of youth work.
- The professional identity of youth work should be contested; the youth workers often concentrate too closely on the individual level and forget about the importance of intergenerational relations in the lives of young people.
- There should be recognition of the role of youth work in offering secure adult models and security to young refugees, whose family members are scattered around the world or with whom contact has been cut.

### **3) The role of leisure time in the lives of young asylum seekers**

The young people shared that waiting for the resident permit was the hardest thing in their everyday lives – it disturbed their concentration, caused anxiety and made it difficult to fall asleep at night. According to the interviewees, not only was the waiting itself hard but waiting for any information about the process made it even more unbearable. Some immigration researchers have noted that 'waitinghood/waithood' (e.g. Honwana 2014) as an analytical tool should be used in order to produce new and critical insights into how young asylum seekers' everyday lives are produced and governed. Attention should also be paid to how Western states receive young people who are fleeing poverty and conflict, and how the immigration laws and policies are sensitive to age, gender and intergenerational relations (Sirriyeh 2013). 'Waitinghood' might also have important consequences for migrants' physical and mental health and wellbeing, as well as for their inclusion in the society as a whole (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016).

The young, unaccompanied minors said that the best way to resist the consequences of waiting was active participation in school and leisure activities. Going to school gave a rhythm and meaning to everyday life and the possibility of getting in touch with Finnish youth. The reception centre where we conducted our second study was focusing intensively on finding suitable hobbies for all the young people. The Ministry of Education also gave financial support to NGOs in late 2015 especially for leisure activities for refugee children and youth. When we interviewed some of the

representatives of these organisations, they told us that they had been surprised about how much coordination the leisure activities for young refugees required. According to the informants, special attention had to be put on, for example, guiding the young people to the leisure activities and ways of developing trustful relationships with other young people in this environment. Many times, obstacles to fruitful civic participation were invisible to the adult professionals belonging to the white majority. Many of the young people whom we interviewed stated, for example, how hard it was to find Finnish friends in school and during their leisure time.

*Recommendations for youth work practices:*

- Meaningful leisure, school and friendship networks frame the everyday lives of young refugees. However, these contacts and practices do not develop by themselves; young people need special support and understanding.
- Tools that promote friendship networks with the majority youth should be understood from the beginning of the waiting process in the reception centre and elsewhere.
- The right to basic education should be implemented for all refugee youth irrespective of age (in Finland, compulsory education ends at age 17).

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