

# Refugee Youth Educational Trajectories

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*Abstract: This is an account of three refugee youth (Yaser; Abas and Malek) that flight from their home countries and arrived in Greece after 2015 as unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. All three youngsters were fluent in English and engaged in public narration at the Intercultural Forum in Nafplion Greece in June 2018. Through vivid narratives they showcase their tireless efforts to obtain formal education and fulfil their dreams. A narrative approach was deployed to analyze narrators' educational trajectories with emphasis on thematic and performative aspects. Overall, all three narrators repositioned themselves, as deserving newly arrived individuals that advocated for the right to equitable education.*

*Keywords: Public Narratives, Refugee Unaccompanied Youth, Educational Trajectories*

## The context

In 2015 more than a million refugees reached Europe seeking asylum (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>) including 88,300 unaccompanied minors (Eurostat 2016). In the following years the trend of arriving unaccompanied children was downsized with some 31,400 in 2017 and 19,700 in 2018 reaching Europe, although the numbers were quite large. In 2018, 86% of unaccompanied children were boys and in their great majority (75%) between 16 to 17 years old (Eurostat 2019). In 2019 (January-June), a 34 per cent of children coming to Europe were still unaccompanied and separated children (UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM 2019). Europe's initial reaction was a widespread humanitarian support. However, the increased numbers of arrivals provoked fears regarding home security fueled by the media's inflammatory language. Consequently, strict migration regulations and border controls were put in place, changing the initial reaction into a narrative of "refugee as a 'crisis'" (Lems, Oesterb and Strasser 2019, p.1).

In this context, refugee young people were portrayed either as innocent/ vulnerable victims or villains (Wernesjö 2019). On the one hand, refugee youth were also depicted as "a distinct humanitarian category" (Lems et al. 2019, 10) based on their victimhood, trauma, vulnerability and innocence (Malkki 2010). This category was portrayed as "the human face of the 'crisis'" (Lems et al. 2019, 11). Being deprived of their political biographies (Malkki 2010) they were accused of fabricating a façade of innocence (Ticktin 2016). Thus, the moral responsibility of protection and for outside intervention in the child's best interest was cemented in the ideology about innocent childhoods and children's rights. Refugee young people were expected to act as the "passive victims of an adult's world" (Lems et al. 2019, 11) without being given any chance of active agency and decision making. Victimhood, passiveness and lack of autonomy in determining their own lives became the new stereotypes of refugee youth disempowering them from pursuing their future aspirations (Jackson 2013).

On the other hand, the unaccompanied refugees were inextricably linked to a 'culture of disbelief' (Finch 2005) as they represented "the embodiment of the deep fears and anxieties that

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where the by-product of this refugee ‘crisis’” (Lems et al. 2019, 6). Widespread suspicion evolved around these children’s aim to mislead Europe about their asylum claims and motives, so to access the already strained welfare system (Wernesjö 2019). “A binary opposition between ‘genuine’ refugees and ‘bogus’ economic migrants” (or strategic and untrustworthy asylum seekers) surfaced (Lems et al. 2019, 8). The first were deserving protection and care due to humanitarian responsibility. The second “were driven by economic opportunism” not eligible for protection (Lems et al. 2019, 8). Instead of being children ‘at risk’, the public narratives of ‘crisis’ depicted refugee youth as fraudulent and problematic (the ‘imposter children’ as noted by Silverman 2016) who were embodying ‘the risk’ (Heidbrink 2014). They were also associated with configurations of criminality due to their ‘problematic masculinity’ (Herz 2018). Europe became fearful “of hordes of young asylum-seeking men threatening Europe’s moral and social order” (Pruitt, Berents, and Munro 2018, 695 in Lems et al. 2019, 2). Thus, the narratives of ‘crisis’ turned the child victim into ‘signifiers’ or ‘the embodiment of ‘crisis’ (Lems et al. 2019, 14).

However, refugee young people are not either “passive victims of an adult’s world or overly agentive young people” who traverse different social and cultural contexts (Lems et al. 2019, 15). Focusing on the refugee youth demands a balanced approach as they constitute important actors in the migratory processes (Ni Laoire, White, and Skelton 2017). Violation of rights by virtue of their age and vulnerability, the lack of family support, and traumatic experiences are important elements in defining their status throughout their migratory journey. Nevertheless, their complex biographies witness the deployment of multiple strategies to deal with transnational border crossing and disempowering social conditions. These young people are going through a delicate phase in their lives being at the intersection of youth and refugeeeness, trying to overcome ambiguity and constant change (Morrice, Tip, Brown and Collyer 2019, 2).

In this context, education becomes a critical denominator in securing refugee youth’s autonomy, social navigation skills and agency to manifest a sense of “conditional belonging” in their arriving countries (Wernesjö 2019, 14). Participation to quality education can ensure personal, wellbeing, social integration and better employment (Molla 2019). Nevertheless, refugee children have limited access to education for compared to global average figures. Only 61% attend primary school (91% global average) and 23% are enrolled in secondary school (84% global average) (Cerna 2019, 16). Numbers are very scarce for post-secondary and tertiary educational access. Overall refugee youth experiences are characterized by disrupted schooling, language barriers, poor quality of instruction and discrimination (Dryden-Peterson 2015, 6).

There is little research undertaken however, to fully understand refugee youth’s own perceptions of their educational aspirations. This paper sheds light on refugee youth educational trajectories as they have unfolded through their migratory process.

## **Method – Public Narration**

This account is of three refugee youth that had taken flight from their home countries and arrived in Greece after 2015 as unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (without their parents or guardians): Yaser a 16 years old boy who came from Afghanistan and was being adopted by an American woman in Greece; Abas from Afghanistan (22 years old) and Malek born in Laayoune, the capital of Western Sahara (23 years old). All three youngsters were fluent in English and engaged in public narration at the Intercultural Forum in Nafplion Greece in June 2018 to showcase their tireless efforts to obtain formal education. They exposed themselves to an international audience seeking to justify new interpretations of their stories and initiate future actions. What was told was shaped by the encounter with the audience and “the in-between space of intersubjectivity” (Jackson 2013 as cited in Wernesjö 2019, 5). Public narration was an act of self-representation and belonging “weighed against potential risks and against what it would be

most expedient to say in a specific situation” (Wernesjö 2019, 6). The audience, comprised of 100 academics/practitioners, was highly empathetic and felt touched and inspired by the morality and valid human reactions projected in the stories. Listeners could identify themselves with the three narrators and feel for them. Through these stories, listeners were able to reflect on their own value system, life journeys, struggles to overcome adversity and critical life choices/risks.

A narrative approach (Arvanitis, Yelland and Kiprianos 2019; Arvanitis and Yelland 2019) was deployed to analyze narrators’ educational trajectories. Emphasis was placed on the themes/meanings that emerged and most importantly, on the *performative aspect* of each narrative. As Riessman (2005, 5) has noted the “storytelling is seen as performance – by a “self” with a past – who involves, persuades, and (perhaps) moves an audience through language and gesture, “doing” rather than telling alone”. This performative aspect implies “identity construction – how narrators want to be known, and precisely how they involve the audience in “doing” their identities” (Riessman (2005, 5). In this case, narrators performed a preferred self and interpreted their past through chosen life circumstances and aspirations meaningful for the audience. However, “the “truths” of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future” (Riessman 2005, 6).

The three young refugees purposefully engaged in a public narrative (Ganz 2011) to self-reflect, advocate the right to education and inspire/mobilize the audience. Each narrator talked about a) volatile and unexpected refugee circumstances and challenges. b) necessary life decision making choices, twists and turns in their refugee/migratory journeys; and c) desired outcomes /destination (fulfilling their educational goals). Their Public Narratives tended to project a similar story plot (Ganz 2011, 283287). Firstly, they projected ‘a story of self’ (a call to leadership/agency). Powerful individual stories revealed before the audience for circumstances that shaped narrators’ life path. Emphasis was given to the choices made at critical points which enabled actors to define their life course and deal with uncertainty, pain and loss. The stories of self, revealed the key defining moments in one’s life and the values that kept their humanity alive.

Secondly, narrators tried to create ‘a story of us’ (shared values and experiences). Their stories turned into a testimony for community action as they showcased narrators’ willingness to advocate and lead for social change. This was achieved through telling a story about refugee youngsters who are deprived the right to education due to their refugeeeness. Their narrations demonstrated a moral stance through a paradigm of risky decision making, resilience and hope that invites the community to take action. Overall, narrators performed agency and collective leadership as they accepted an ethical responsibility to call others to co-act with them to fulfil the fundamental human right of education.

Finally, narrators yield ‘a story of now’ (strategy and action plan). Their public narratives invited the audience to understand the urgency to deal with refugeeeness. In doing so, narrators deployed emotions such as gratefulness, agony, urgency, solidarity, humor and disappointment. They also declared resilience, hope and determination to make a difference as global citizens. These emotions were demonstrations of what these young refugees valued the most namely, freedom, right to education and a need to have choice in making their future brighter. Their emotions/narratives sought to motivate the audience to *feel* what matters and share the same values so to undertake action.

## **Impact of Public narratives**

All three stories were compelling accounts of ‘resilience’ and ‘agency’ (Luster et al. 2010). Own lived experiences were also devices to mobilize others into urgent – and hopeful – action that

## JOURNAL TITLE

bring refugees to be treated as individuals who seek their deserved status (as human beings) in their new social contexts. Moreover, as shown in the following sections, young refugees narrated themselves as “skilled social navigators” (Vigh 2009) who constantly moving through transnational borders and countries. They projected themselves as an aspirational youth away from the stereotyping of the “ambivalent crisis figures” (Lems et al. 2019, 15). They turned into being the responsible and deserving newly arrived youth who can actively participate in new social domains as rightful members of the society (Han and Antrosio 2015). In other words, they focused more on their ability to respond to challenges, to take control of their life conditions, to fulfill their potential, to have access to resources, networks and individuals in their destination countries.

The following themes capture the main plot of their narratives:

Initially, all three narrators expressed gratefulness of the opportunity given to them to participate in a public Forum in Greece and communicate their individual stories to academics and practitioners. They were empowered to speak heartfully about their *refugeeness* and their educational journeys. Abas said: *“First of all, I am going to thank and appreciate those people who carried out this event and give us the opportunity to speak here.”* Yaser was also thrilled to find himself in this public forum where the main focus was about refugees. *“Educated people...I cannot believe...Wow! I really appreciate this! Thank you for this organization and thank you for inviting me and also thank you for organizing this amazing conference for us and about us”. It is a big honor for me to be here and my voice to be heard. Thank you very much!”*, he said. This gratitude was more an act of courtesy and a sense of responsibility rather manifesting unequal power relations and submissive attitudes to the host country (Back 2003). These youngsters were polite, but they reserved the right to become critical when referring to educational systems.

### *i) The story of self*

#### **a) Refugeeness**

An important part of these public narratives was the narrators’ effort to demonstrate themselves as “experts of their own lifeworlds” (Lems et al. 2019, 15). Self-representation came through vivid memories of past home and social status, the decision to leave their country, the migratory journey, multiple relocation and liminal conditions of living in refugee camps.

Abas came from Afghanistan. “I came from an artistic family.... My father used to be a singer, actor and musician. My oldest brother used to be a director. He bought a TV station. I have another brother who had a TV show program and I was working there as a journalist, as a video director and as a cameraman. I remember the day when my brothers and I decided to leave our family behind with tears. After crossing many borders, walking at night in mountains and in woods, facing with robbers, police.... We ended up in Turkey. After being two months in Turkey and living in horrible conditions we decided to come to Greece. But we had to cross the Aegean sea. I saw thousands of people lost their life. So, we thought that was not clever that three of us try to cross with the same boat. Because the three of us could die. So, we had to try each one of us ...individually. My older brother said that he was going to try first and he would let us know how it was. All night I was waiting for his call and at the morning he called me. I was crying and I was laughing. I was laughing because he made it, but I was crying for myself and my little brother. My brother told me ‘Abas you shouldn’t cry’. I told him that if I die, I will die as a free man. So, I and my little brother ended up in a boat with 15 other people, people from different countries, different religions, different skin colors”.

Malek since his early childhood experience multiple relocations. “When I was 1 year old, my parents left the country (Western Sahara) and they went to a refugee camp in Algeria,

because of the conflicts. They stayed for some days and then they had to leave again. Because I was 1 year old, I think they could not take me with them. So, they left me with an old lady. She was 70 years old. She adopted me. She became my new mom, my everything. Back then we didn't have like official schools or something like that. So, when I grew up, I had to go to the mosque to study, Koran or Arabic....I hated to go there because they were beating us. Our teacher had a long stick and we were 100 kids in a small room. They had long sticks to reach everybody without moving" (audience laughs). So, I hated that. But there is also another reason why I hated that. I had a great mom who was teaching me inside or outside the house. We didn't even have like notebooks or pen or something. I remember when I was a kid I used to sit on the ground, and we were drawing these Arabic letters on the ground. It was really fascinating for me how she could do this with her hand. So, she was teaching me how to write and how to read and I learned official Arabic which was the Koran".

Yaser left Afghanistan when he was 12 years old because his life was in danger. "So, I left Afghanistan all by myself. After 13 days of journey I arrived in Teheran. In Teheran I started working at the construction site for 3 months. After that I found another job in a factory which made woman clothing. I worked 7 months, I slept there and sometimes I cooked small meals by myself and sometimes people brought me food. Each night I found different spots to sleep. Some nights on the ground, some nights under tables, some nights anywhere". As an Afghan refugee Yaser had no chance to go to school in Iran. Due his non-regular status there was great risk to be caught by the police and sent to jail or back to Afghanistan. During these early days, education wasn't on his mind because he was trying to survive day-by-day. "The boss cheated me by taking some of the money that I have earned. I couldn't go outside. I had to stay inside the factory. So, because of all these reasons I went to Turkey and then to Greece. After crossing borders and mountains I arrived to Turkey and I stayed there for three days and then I crossed the sea by a rubber boat with 16 other people including children....Most of us were children...So, I ended up in Lesvos island", he said.

Two of the narrators went through the Moria Camp in Lesvos upon their arrival in Greece. Yaser recalled: "As an unaccompanied minor I was sent to a place which was like a jail with lots of wires. I was inside in one room with 40 other guys. Of course, there was no opportunity for me to go to school or study something. I was there for 26 days except from a few days in the hospital. There was nothing to do except depression. So, I was sent to Athens, I came to Athens at the Victoria square". On a similar note, Abas recalled: "After seven hours being in a boat that had a hole, we ended up in Lesvos island. We were transported to Moria camp. We had to live inside tents in summer in burning sun and in the freezing winter! Nine people died at Moria camp because of the conditions. Many people committed suicide because of depression. Over seventy percent of people suffered from mental illness, including women and children".

Abas could not bear the conditions in Moria and took action. "I was thinking 'I have to do something before I get sick and I have to bring awareness about the situation'. So, I started to surf about this situation in my mobile phone. I found some documents and then I asked some friends that helped me with their cameras, and I made some documentaries about the situation. I made a documentary about police violence inside the Moria camp....about refugees....That was very risky for me and I had to think about it again and again if it is fine for me or not. I had nightmares when I published this documentary and still sometimes, I feel ... (he laughs) ... scared when I am walking. But I think that we have freedom of speech. I made documentaries about refugees who had asylum but they ended up on the streets....you know.... without education, without anything, without no future.....Children, women, humans finally". A sense of responsibility and moral obligation to report inhumane conditions in Moria sparked his actions. Abas acted on behalf of humanity in this small island of the Aegean. Finally, Fidoon, coped with Moria conditions for several months, but he was extremely concerned about his own future as he "could not seek food for forever" entrapped in this camp. "I was trying to continue my education, but it was not possible for me", he said.

## b) Transnational learning trajectories

Another important theme in all three narrations was the emphasis placed on education as a driving force for fulfilling life goals. Narrators reported disrupted schooling and diverse learning trajectories formed by their constant move from one country to another. Their educational aspirations became part of their refugeeness as they were reshaped by changing conditions. They become transnational learners finding themselves in different official or unofficial learning settings in different countries.

After studying the Koran in his early years, Malek's life took an unexpected turn at the age of 13 when his mother told him that he had to leave. *"I really hated her for that because she was everything to me. I didn't know that there was another thing, called war outside. We didn't have TV or radio or mobile phone or nothing, but I was focusing only on her. She was my everything and one day she came to me and told me 'You have to leave!' and I told her 'Why? Do you hate me? What did I do? I was a good kid all these years, I am learning!' But she knew that there is something out there for me. She knew that I deserve something better and she was right"*. Malek tried to get out from the camps in Algeria and met a family which accepted him to work with them as a shepherd. However, he had always in his mind to go to the school due to his stepmother's advice *"she taught me the love of learning. It was inside of me. So, my boss wanted me to go to school with his three kids. I made some tests and they found that my Arabic was good. So, I was accepted. Then, I started to take good grades, but I was taking good grades because his kids didn't want to do their homework and they were waiting for me. So, I was doing mine and theirs like three times and that's why I became better than them. They failed. Then I finished the high school. I had planned my future. I was going to study Arabic literature at college and then I wanted to go to Syria to learn the 'real' Arabic because it was before the war in Syria"*. But the school decided that Malek could not study in the college because of his refugee status in Algeria. *"I was really sad because I planned, and I did everything to get accepted, but I didn't give up. I was willed to go to college. I sneaked there to listen and take notes from the lecture without teachers seeing me. And then they couldn't find me on the exams because I was not officially registered there. I did that for one year and a half"*. Then he decided to leave Algeria and move on. *"I fell in love with a girl from Tunisia and then I said, 'I will go to Tunisia and maybe I will find something else'"*. (he laughs). In Tunisia he was learning French, but it was very hard for him. He recalls the first time he heard the English language. *"I was like 'Oh! This is really good and easy!' I remember I was on the ground when I heard these voices from TV, and I left my notebook and my pen right there. I went to learn English and I fell in love with the movies and the way that people in America live"*. Malek has vivid memories from the English TV shows and movies of this time, and he recalls pictures of young students at college sitting on the grass and reading a book. *"So, this is my dream! I am not telling you that I want to be accepted in an American college -of course not. .... I do not deserve it, but at least one day I will find an American College, I will sneak in, take my book, sit on the grass and read for 10 minutes and then run away before someone gets me caught. (he laughs) This was my dream, nothing else"*, he stated.

In Tunisia, Malek tried to get to college, but he was not accepted. Then he decided to leave Africa. *"I said to my girlfriend 'I have to leave! This is it with Africa. I need something else...I have this desire to learn and I want to do something.... I want get my voice to be heard....I have a lot of things to say. I do not know if they are good or bad, but I just want to yell them.... I want to say them to people'"*. Malek left without his girlfriend first to Libya without passport or papers where he stayed for two months aiming to make the crossing to Italy. He was unlucky as he was got up by the police and deported to Sudan. Due to his skin color the police thought that he is from Sudan. *"But it was a free trip, so I said, 'Let's go!'"* (laughs). From Sudan he found a way

to come to Greece aiming to make his path to other European countries but failed to find a way out. *“So, I said ‘Ok! I am going to give a chance to this country! Maybe it is good for me’. I started learning the language with some NGOs and also I wanted to get accepted to college, but they told me ‘You have to learn the language! It is not only the learning... you have to be really good at it!’ But I kept my eyes and my ears open for anything about English”*. Malek’s wander in Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan and Greece forged his strong vision about receiving education and fulfilling his dreams. His decision-making process was influenced by the given circumstances, but he was determined to keep moving.

On the other hand, Yaser had to cope with the Greek educational system and find his way out of it. When he arrived in Athens, Yaser placed a shelter in Victoria square. *“There I felt very happy because I would go to school and take English classes. So, I went to a Greek school. There was something that I loved there, but in other way it was very disappointing for me. I loved that I was attending in the math class at this school because my math teacher was very very friendly, and she was very kind. Also, you do not need to know the language in order to take math classes. So, the other thing that was very disappointing for me. I was sitting in the class, in the back side, having my phone with me, playing Clash of Clans (it is a strategy video game), using Snap chat, Instagram, Facebook and the teachers were coming and yelling at me ‘Hey, Joe! Why are you not listening?’ If I don’t know the language how can I listen to you? For my perspective language is the key and education is the treasure inside the box and it’s locked! But if you don’t have the key how can you open the box and read the treasure? So, I missed that treasure when I was here at this school.*

Yaser expressed his despair and became critical of the Greek system as he felt he was missing the opportunity to obtain quality education: *Yes, of course we had Greek classes, I don’t ignore that! Of course, we had Greek classes. How were the Greek classes? I am going to tell you. Every day we had one-hour Greek class. I was going to the Greek class with many other refugees and when the teacher was coming in all the kids started making noise and not listening to the teacher. What was the problem? The teacher didn’t know how to control the class. She didn’t have the power, the power of voice. She was the kind of person ...I am not saying just because of her and sorry, but I have to say it. It’s because of the education system. There was a lot of criticizing. Everyone said ‘Yea, it’s impossible! She cannot teach us.’ But she kept coming every day and she couldn’t control the class. So, I couldn’t learn anything there. Nevertheless, I was studying English many hours at school and with my mom. She was teaching me English every day. So, I went to 7<sup>th</sup> grade and I finished 7<sup>th</sup> grade without knowing any language. I don’t know how but I finished the 7<sup>th</sup> grade”, he concluded.*

### **c) Given a chance for education**

Finally, the three narrators made a breakthrough as new opportunities risen. Yaser was able to continue his post-secondary education in Finland, whereas Abas and Malek were given scholarships in an American program called “Education Unites: From Camp to Campus”. This program run for young refugees by the U.S. Embassy in Athens and three American affiliated colleges in Greece (the Deree College in Athens, the Anatolia College and the Perrotis College – American Farm School in Thessaloniki - <https://www.acg.edu/news-events/news/education-unites-from-camp-to-campus/> & <https://gr.usembassy.gov/education-culture/education-unites/>). This short-lived program offered two courses per student for two semesters (Fall 2017 and Spring 2018) including preparatory English classes, academic classes and vocational training. Overall 100 students were accepted in the program.

Abas recalls: “Finally, I learned about Deere University. I applied for it and they accepted me. I was very happy. I moved from Lesvos island to Athens and I started taking classes at this university. Thank you, thank you, thank you!!! This is the word that every day when I go to the

## JOURNAL TITLE

university, I repeat to myself". Abas thinks that he is "the luckiest refugee in the world" because of the opportunity to continue his education.

On the other hand, Malek heard about the Deree program when he was in Greece and he thought: "'Ok! I will give it a shot!' I applied and I got accepted. I remember the email from Ms. Cathrine. I was looking it in my phone, and I remembered my mom. She knew that there is something for me and maybe this is it. As far as Deree is concerned, I am thinking that I will study something from the major of Communication because I love movies and I want to make movies. And I want to write because I want to write scripts and things and make a lot of movies. I know that at Deree I can develop my voice and I can sharpen my creativity and touch people out there. On Monday I had the opportunity to screen my first short movie in the festival of Deree. It was the first thing that I did. It was great for me".

Malek has developed a clear plan about his future endeavors as he writes scripts and utilizes all the help his teachers can offer. He also had the opportunity to event pitch his business idea. "Since I was accepted at Deree I don't think that I need an alarm clock to wake up because my passion wakes me up every day and my passion for Deree. When I entered to that school, they asked me 'Why you had this special smile when you entered?' I told them 'It's like they have another oxygen there!' I don't know how to explain! My dream came true! I mean I grab a book, I sat on the grass and I started reading and nobody had chased me after that!"

Another recipient of this program at Deree was the 23 years old Ramid, a Kurd from Iran who send a note to this public forum. Ramid said that this program has provided him with many opportunities for future career and more importantly future friendships. "I have not felt more alive than the time when I applied to Deree in all three years that I have been to Greece. This program has freed me from labels that I could have as a refugee or immigrant. It made me just a student, a feeling that I have lost. Being a student at Deree gave me hope again, made me realize that I still have got some chance in life and I can be a successful person in the near future. It made me realize that I am not doomed to all these labels that are like fences, walls or borders for my dreams", he said.

Finally, learning opportunities unfolded for Yaser as after completing his grade 7 in Greece went to Finland due to the reunification program (his brother was in Finland). He was sent to the Arctic, in a very icy and remote place where there was nothing for him to do. He felt that his was missing the educational opportunities Finland offers to people. He complained about this to his guardian, but she replied: 'We do offer many opportunities, but not for you, for Finnish.' Yaser's American stepmother made huge efforts to enroll him in an international school in Helsinki where he could see his dreams coming true. "So, I went to this school. This school is like my house. I do everything at school. Even the weekends when I don't have school I miss the school...I want to run and go to school". When the school ended Yaser asked to offer voluntary work at the schools' summer camp. "At first, I was struggling with the language, but the teachers helped me, and I got a lot of support from that school. I finished the 8<sup>th</sup> grade with very high grades. Almost I got an honor... I also discovered that I got scholarship from this school. For the first time I feel secure about my future, about my education...For the first time I feel that 'Yes, I can graduate from this school and I can go to the university. My aim is to go to the Arts in Harvard'! And he concluded: "I am one of the luckiest refugees because I have this mom".

Overall, in all three narratives, education unlocks the future potential for prosperous wellbeing and employment (Chase 2019; Meloni 2019). Narrators manifested of how they adapted their trajectories through risky life choices and hard work to claim proper educational opportunities in different countries. For them education was a meaningful pathway towards independency and adulthood. They felt the luckiest people in the world when they found their place as students in a formal setting. They felt deserving to be entitled to education. However, they thought of other refugees who were not so lucky. Abas made a clear statement about this. He said: "There are thousands of refugees with no education. People who are better than me for sure and they want to study and continue their education". And he continued: "Now we are just a

few people who are studying ...which is great, and I will appreciate it forever and it has changed my life. But that is only for a number of people”.

### **ii) *The story of us: Reclaiming humanity***

Furthermore, narrators alerted the audience of the responsibility to reclaim humanity through human qualities such as freedom, equality, intelligence and dignity. All three narratives acted as a mechanism of verifying self as a human being and reaffirm self through refugeeness. For instance, when Abas reached the Greek shores safely, he realized that all his co-travelers in the boat (whether they were Muslim or Christian, black or white, with Iranian or Afghan or Syrian passport) had something in common. *“We were all humans and we had the same destiny”* He momentarily paused his narration breaking into tears and he continued. *“Sorry! It was the first time in my whole life I felt equality. Because at the border line we could all die without any discrimination”*, he sadly noted.

On the other hand, Yaser had to confront stereotyping and labelling due to his refugee status in Iran when one of his co-workers disputed his smartness to learn fast. *“‘Joe’ it takes three years to other people to learn how to make a dress, but you learn it in three months. I really want to know how refugees do that”* said one of his co-workers. Yaser replied: *“Well, you know what? I am a refugee! Of course, I came from Afghanistan to Teheran, from that country to this country. I am not a stupid person, I used to be very smart’. Sorry I didn’t want to say this word, but I want to say because I think is the right time to say it. Yes! I used to be very smart. In Afghanistan every year I was one of the top students at school....in my class, in my school. Everyone knew me there. I had my book everywhere no matter where I was. So, I learned these strategies from there. Also, I used these strategies to learn English. In one year, I was talking English.* Yaser was proud of himself and that he could prove his ability to speak English in front of a large academic audience.

### **iii) *The story of now: Advocating for and about refugees***

Finally, all three young refugees saw themselves as privileged youth who were obliged to advocate for other refugees. The urgency of the matter became apparent as they tried to infuse empathy to the audience and alert people on the refugee issue.

Abas cried out: *“Have you ever think or feel ....what is going to happen if you have to leave your everything behind? All of those things that matter for you?.... Your family, your job, your education, your home, everything! Millions of people had to leave their everything because of prosecution. This is the largest displacement after the Second World War”*. He called for action in support of refugees. *“Right now, we are sitting in this beautiful room (mosque) with beautiful people .... But beautiful people, there are people who are dying right now. People who are surviving, people who have to cross the Aegean see, people who are living in tents, people who are seeking for food. I know that you all feel so sorry about this situation. But please don’t! Because being sorry is not going to change anything. We have to do something before all we have to leave our homes, our ...everything”*. Yaser also tried to sensitize the audience by making an explicit reference to the millions of people who experience refugee status globally. *“They said that 65.5 million people will be displaced. What about those people and lots of children? Everyone needs a guardian, everyone needs a mentor to help them ...I am one of the luckiest that I got all of these from my mom”*, he said. On the same mode Yaser stated his willingness to become a politician so to advocate for these people. *“When I was at North, I wanted to be a doctor, an engineer or a journalist but now I changed my mind to be a politician”*, he said.

## Conclusion

Conflicting public discourses and fears have formed the figure of the refugee youth in Europe. Overlapping dichotomies of victimhood (e.g. vulnerability and passiveness, in need of care) versus configurations of fraudulent youth embodying the risk (e.g. being strategic migrants) have surfaced in public discourses. However, the stories presented here challenged the public narrative of crisis. It became apparent that these young people skillfully went through critical transitions and deployed risk-taking strategies in their effort to reclaim their right to education. They were aspired to r(e)construct their identity as decent and responsible living beings telling stories against the backdrop of the ambiguous figure ascribed to them.

Overall, all three narrators repositioned themselves, as deserving newly arrived individuals who manifest a “conditional belonging” in the hosting society (Wernesjö 2019, 14). They declared themselves as active/ responsible participants and advocates. They shared hopeful aspirations to take advantage of the educational opportunities without posing a risk to the society. Their narratives testify to their agency, independence and their education-driven attributes and away from victimhood or untrustworthiness. Their experiences talk of “who they are and want to become” (Wernesjö 2019, 12).

These public narratives were of course, context bound. The three young refugees constructed their public narratives in interaction with their audience choosing the themes and the plot of their stories. It was a performative and meaningful act echoing refugee youth determination, agency and advocacy. All three young people demonstrated an eagerness to actively make sense of the new social settings they had been relocated to throughout their migratory journeys. At the same time, they attempted to position themselves productively in these environments, so as to fulfill their potential.

Giving the opportunity to these three young refugees to deliver their public narratives in an international audience was very empowering to their cause. The three narratives functioned as a device to engage the audience, so as to advocate also the right to education and for those people unable to have the chance of publicly talking about their refugeeeness and educational aspirations. They also posed an invitation to the outer community to join the righteous cause for quality education for all humans.

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