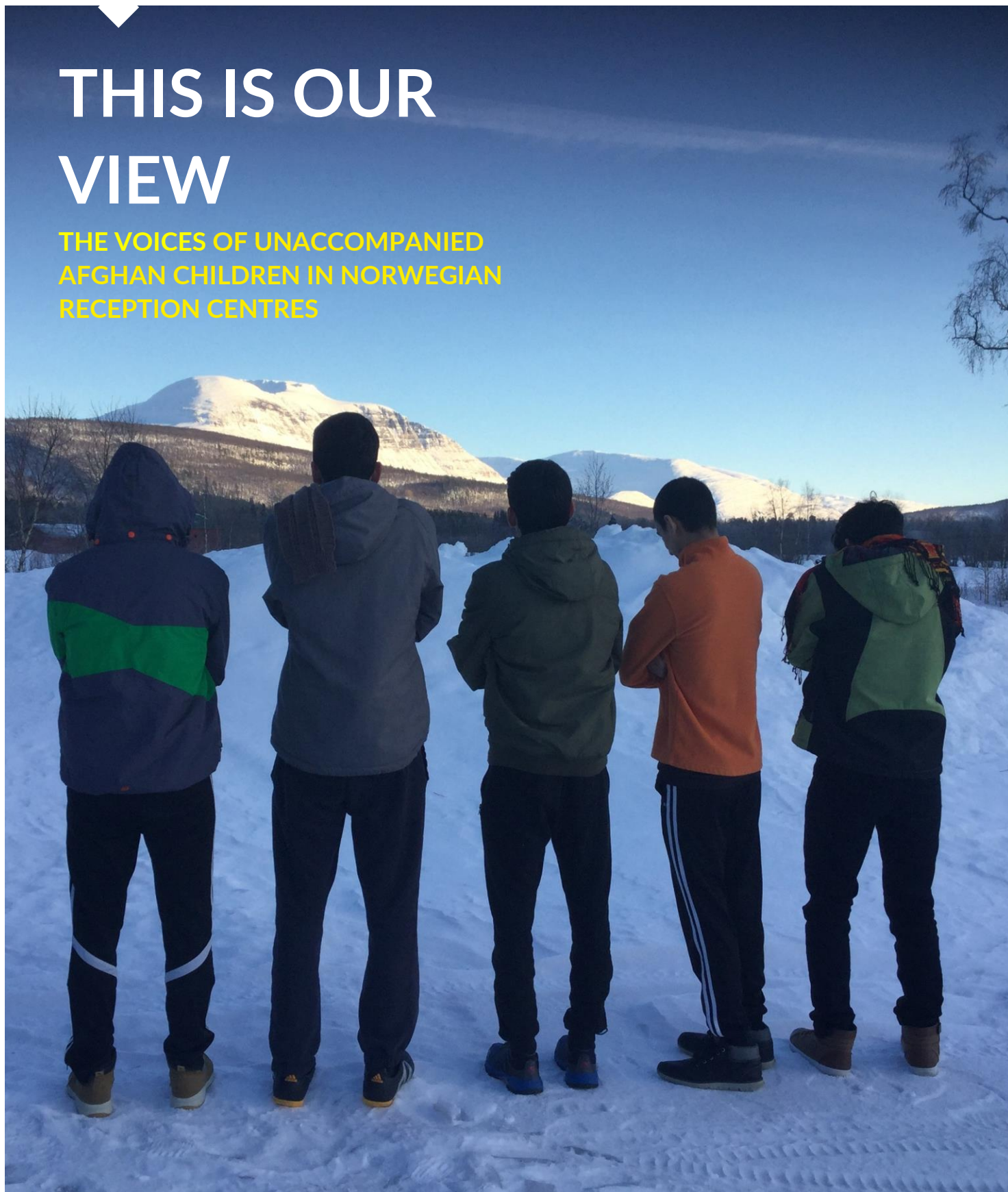


THIS IS OUR VIEW

THE VOICES OF UNACCOMPANIED
AFGHAN CHILDREN IN NORWEGIAN
RECEPTION CENTRES



Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to all participants in this study. We are sincerely grateful to the children who agreed to be interviewed for this research, who opened up about their situation, and shared their personal experiences with us.

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Harald Solhberg "Vinternatt i Rondane" (1914)

1. Introduction

The 2015 influx of asylum-seekers in Europe brought high numbers of Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASCs) applying for asylum in Northern Europe. Alarming accounts, in the media and reports in both Sweden and Norway, have since arisen in the region concerning the psychological well-being of these children.

This study aims to provide insight into how the Afghan UASC perceive and understand their situation in Norway. The study allowed the UASC to raise topics they wanted to discuss in relation to the welcome they received. The focus mainly lies on the UASC's daily lives in Norway, the legal guardians, Norway as a destination, and their future. The pervading theme was the temporary or declined residence permits and their effect on the children. The study is a continuation of a similar, broader study carried out in Sweden in the spring of 2016 called "This Is Who We Are". With this report, UNHCR hopes to inspire further discussion about the needs and reception of the UASC in the region.

In total, 52 UASC of Afghan origin living in reception centres around Norway participated in eight focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were conducted in six locations, largely spread throughout the country. Using an empirical approach and a strong participatory focus in the group discussions, the study lends a voice to these children.

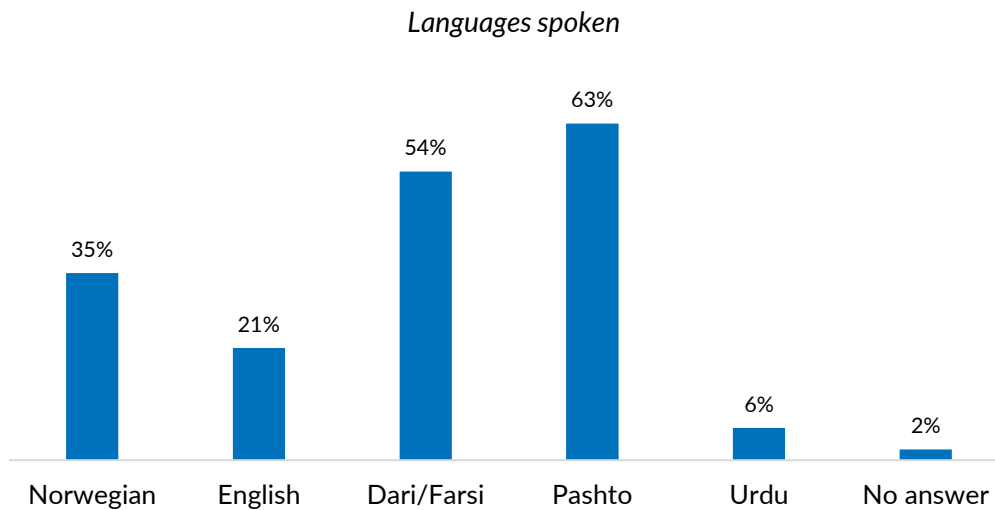
Key Findings:

- The children were vocal about their **psycho-social situation** and how the negative and temporary decisions have negatively impacted their **mental well-being**.
- Many of the children expressed **thoughts of suicide**, trouble sleeping, an inability to focus on/at school and fears about the situation in Afghanistan. In every group, at least one child bore **scars of self-harm** and several children mentioned they had attempted suicide in Norway.
- According to the children, the **quality of legal guardians** greatly varies, with the majority expressing that they received little to no support from their guardian.

2. Participant Profiles

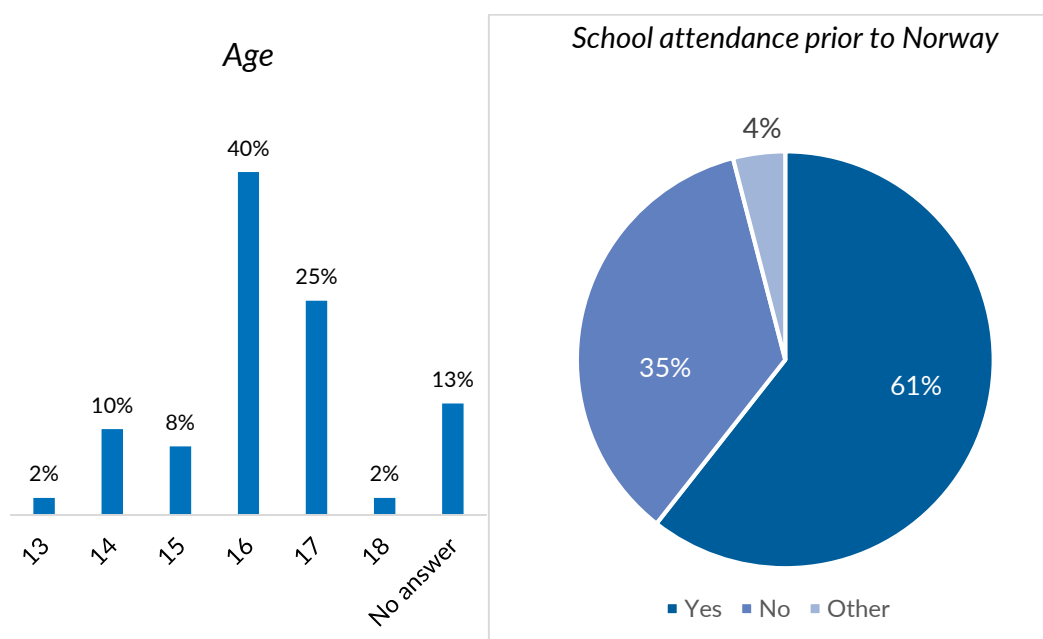
The focus group discussions were carried out with Afghan UASC from eight centres around Norway. The discussions were held at the reception centres, a school and at a Red Cross facility. The themes in the focus group discussions were centred on topics related to reception and arrival in Norway, but each group was free to steer the discussion towards topics they wanted to raise.

In addition to the focus group discussions, each participant was asked to fill out a short questionnaire about their lives before arriving in Norway. The aim was to provide background information and a further basis to analyse the findings from the focus group discussions. In total, 48 out of the 52 participants responded to the survey. The answers are anonymous, and all participants could choose to respond to all or some of the questions. The interpreter explained the questions to all the participants and helped them respond. It is, however, important to note that although the information provided is representative of the participants in this study, the results should not be understood to represent the entire group of Afghan UASC in Norway.



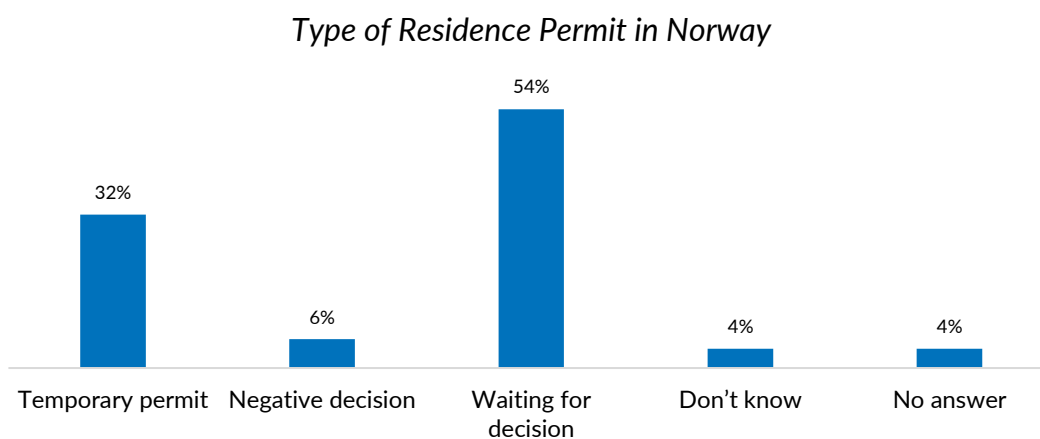
Based on the information from the questionnaires, the majority of the participants are Pashtuns or Hazara. They speak Pashto or Dari/Farsi and many participants speak both languages. Additionally, a significant proportion of the participants report they speak Norwegian and English.

The vast majority of the participants were between 16 and 17 years old, however, some were as young as 13 years old. Almost all participants in the focus group discussions reported they had been born in Afghanistan and a vast majority also reported that Afghanistan had been their main place of residence throughout their lives.



The majority of the participants reported they had lived with their family in their main place of residence. By family, the children specified they meant both parents, siblings, grandparents and other relatives. A minority of the participants reported they had lived with either their mother or father, both parents or with their uncles or grandmother. The majority of the participants in the focus group discussions had attended school prior to leaving their country of main residence. The most common attained level of education amongst the participants is primary school and madras – a religious educational institution.

The vast majority of the participants arrived in Norway during the fall of 2015 and only 3 participants in total arrived in Norway in 2016. However, over half of the participants were still waiting for a decision on their asylum application. Out of those who had received a decision, the majority had received a temporary permit. A small proportion of the children also reported they didn't know if they had received a decision or not.





Young afghan asylum seekers in Norway. ©UNHCR

3. What the children had to say

The discussions with the children were centred on four main topics: daily life in Norway, legal guardians, why the children chose to come to Norway specifically, and the future.

A strong participatory approach was employed as the children's input guided the discussions. Additionally, the children were asked mid-way through the discussions if they felt the questions asked were on target, and what they thought UNHCR should ask them. Time was also allocated at the end of each discussion for additional concerns or topics the children might want to bring up.

In general, the children were eager to speak with UNHCR and expressed gratitude at being listened to. Staff at the various centres were asked to share any potentially negative effect the discussions might have had on the children, but no such reports have been shared with UNHCR thus far.

3.2 Daily life in Norway

“Life here is getting worse day by day”.

Boy, on daily life in Norway.

When asked about their situation in Norway, an overwhelming majority of the children used the same word to describe their daily lives: difficult. A few participants, particularly among the younger boys, said they had overall good lives. These boys were the minority. Thoughts of suicide were often raised in discussions, and at least one child in each group but one bore scars, presumably from self-harm. Several children also said that they or others at the centres had previously attempted suicide. One boy explained that they had started new lives in Norway but receiving rejections and temporary permits after one year “destroyed our lives”. When discussing daily life at the reception centre, one boy made his priorities clear: “Our asylum case is the most important thing, not the activities at the centre”. When the other boys asked if they felt the same way, they all nodded in agreement.

“My friend here has become a different man.
This is like being dead”.

Boy, on how life has changed since the rejections and temporary permits.

Depending on the groups, the topics dominating this section of the discussions varied from the rejections and temporary permits, the situation in Afghanistan, feelings of hopelessness with transportation issues, access to healthcare, activities and tension with the staff at the centres. The children often cited an increased level of stress and pressure in recent months. As one boy explained, “When we arrived in Norway we didn't think about these decisions. But in the last two months, there has been a lot of stress. What will happen next?”

Several children, boys and girls alike, mentioned having trouble sleeping, stating they had “1000 problems”. Mostly the children spoke of stress regarding what would happen to them, as well as being far away from their country and, for a few, separated from their families. A few boys spoke of not being able to sleep following deportations: “I can't sleep. In the other camp, the police came at 5 in the morning to take my friends back to Afghanistan”.

Being sick and getting access to healthcare were topics raised by children in many groups. One recurrent issue was a feeling that the staff at the centres wouldn't take children to the doctor when they needed care. Instead, the boys said they were always told to rest and drink liquids. As one boy put it: “If we are sick and ask to go to the doctor, we have to wait until

we are fresh, and don't need help." A second issue was that the children felt they received little help when they did get to see a doctor, often receiving the same advice that the staff centre had given them: *"sleep and drink water"*. The costs associated with doctor's visits were raised as problematic, with one boy saying, *"The money we receive is not enough. So, if we get sick, we can't go [to the doctor]"*. Another boy added, *"We get 3000 per month for bus cards, the doctor and activities. We are responsible for everything"*.

“20 000 NOK. This is the value of our lives”.

Boy, on the assistance to voluntary return.

The situation in Afghanistan came up in all the groups, with several participants expressing that they were often told they'd be sent back to Afghanistan. Two of the groups mentioned the UDI would give them 20 000 NOK to return to Afghanistan. One boy pointed out that he *"spent that much [money] coming here,"* while others questioned what they were expected to do with the money. One boy wanted to ask the UDI: *"If I give you 100 000 NOK, would you go [to Afghanistan]?"* Several participants voiced that they were not in Norway for the money, but that the most important thing for them was safety. Many boys also expressed that, as Afghans, they were discriminated against in the asylum process. They questioned why Syria was considered unsafe, yet Afghanistan was not.

“I have a lot of interest in going to school, but I cannot focus”.

Girl, on the problems that preoccupy her.

The value of education was highlighted in all groups and most of the children had learned Norwegian. One boy stated he and his friends used to be very committed to school and would get up early to be there on time. Another boy said, *"School is the only reason we are alive and can enjoy things"*. The girls and boys alike spoke of difficulties concentrating at school, as well as a lack of motivation to attend classes in recent months. One boy explained, *"We are going to school, but not properly. We get a rejection and don't want to go any more"*. Others expressed a feeling that, with their rejected asylum applications, school no longer held the same purpose: *"We like school, but since we got rejections, school doesn't mean anything anymore"*. One boy though, stated, *"I got a rejection, but I still go to school. I still want to go [to school]. I really want to stay here"*.

“All we have is each other”.

Girls, on feeling alone and being the only three girls in a centre surrounded by boys.

The girls expressed similar concerns, stating they couldn't sleep, fearing that their applications would be rejected. *"We haven't heard about anyone getting positive responses from UDI. So many of the boys have gotten rejections. I'm really afraid, I can't sleep"*. They mentioned being stressed, not sleeping well and waiting a long time without getting decisions. Additionally, they talked about feeling alone among a high number of boys and finding themselves surrounded by Afghan boys; effectively living in a society similar to the one they left behind. As one of the girls explained, *"We're not afraid [in the centre] but we're not safe"*.

3.2. Legal guardians

“Don't ask us about the legal guardians, we have too many problems with them”.

Boy, on legal guardians.

Legal guardians and their roles was a topic that many of the children engaged in. The majority of the children weren't pleased with their legal guardians, and were more vocal about it. In every group, a maximum of 2-3 children were satisfied with their legal guardians, or at least had good things to say about them. The most common sentiment expressed among the children was that their legal guardians did close to nothing for them, both in terms of practicalities and emotional support. As one boy put it: *"If I need his help to call NOAS or something, [my legal guardian] tells me to call them myself"*.

Several children, boys and girls alike, scoffed or laughed at the notion that their legal guardians would help them. Most of the boys spoke of having little to no contact with their legal guardians. Some mentioned having met or spoken to them once or twice in the 8-12 months they had been in Norway, while others stated they've had no contact whatsoever with their legal guardians in the several months they've been in the country. One boy stated: *"They're the contact person between us and the UDI. But mine doesn't help me"*. Another boy said he asked his legal guardian in the first meeting what his name was and where he lived, only to be told he was not allowed to ask him that. According to the boy, he found out his guardian's name later, but only through official papers.

Frustrated children gave examples of guardians having too many children in their care to provide accurate support to all of them, guardians arriving at the centre but stating they didn't have time to talk to the children, and guardians stating that talking to the children

was not their responsibility. In a few cases, the children had received derogatory comments from their guardians. One child stated he had been told by his guardian to:

“Be ready, we are sending you back [to Afghanistan]”.

Boy, on the role of legal guardians.

Boys who had been tasked with producing a Tazkira (Afghanistan identity certificate) by the UDI to complement their case, expressed difficulties with the costs of traveling to the Afghan Embassy in Oslo. The main frustration however, stemmed from the challenges of navigating the unfamiliar terrain of Norwegian society, as well as fulfilling the requirements from the Afghan Embassy. As one boy put it: *“Sometimes we have to go to Oslo for documentation. We ask [the legal guardians] for help to buy tickets. Not for the money, we ask them for help to book tickets because we don’t know the system. But they don’t help us”*.

The girls’ sentiments echoed those raised by the boys. An additional issue raised by the girls, which a few of the boys mentioned as well, was the lack of knowledge legal guardians had about children’s physical and psychological well-being. If the children were sick or felt mentally unwell, that information wasn’t conveyed to the legal guardians. The children were puzzled at how this could be, as one boy put it: *“They should be in touch with the centre and contact us”*.

Some of the children have had several guardians; one boy mentioned he had lived in six different centres and had three legal guardians in his first year in Norway. The primary reason for those children who had more than one guardian appeared to be that the children had been moved to a different location. A new guardian, closer to the child had thus been appointed. The children had been told by the UDI that they had a right to change guardians. In practice though, one boy mentioned he had attempted to change guardians with no success. According to the boy, his contact person at the reception centre told him this wasn’t possible. As far as UNHCR could gather, the matter had only made it to the UDI on the day of the discussions, as the boy explained he had called the UDI that day to discuss the matter. It is important to note that the reasons why the boy wanted to change guardians were not investigated.

“Some of us are lucky and have a good guardian,
some of us don’t”.

Boy, on legal guardian.

The children dissatisfied with their legal guardians expressed awareness that some did have helpful guardians. Equally, several children who were satisfied with their guardians seemed aware that not all children received equal support. As one boy noted: *"My legal guardian is a nice woman, but the rest of my friends complain about theirs"*.

When speaking of good legal guardians, many children explained they're nice, ask how they are and care for them. Only one of the boys who said they were happy with their guardians, mentioned that they were helping him with the UDI or practical matters: *"Yes, we receive some information [about the asylum procedures] from the legal guardians. They explain what the next step is"*. When asked about good guardians, the boys mentioned attributes such as accessibility, kindness and care, as well as continuous contact. One boy who was pleased with his guardian mentioned that *"whenever I call, he answers"*. A few children further mentioned receiving gifts and chocolates and being taken on outings.

"I have a good legal guardian. Sometimes she comes twice a week to talk to me. She asks me how I am".

Boy, on his legal guardian.

In general, however, one boy's description encapsulates the sentiment expressed by all boys who said they were pleased with their legal guardians, as well as what most boys who were displeased wished for: *"He takes care of me, sends me messages and asks if there is anything he can do to help me"*.

In all the groups, only two boys stated outright that they didn't know what the responsibilities of legal guardians were, and whether or not they could help them. The majority of the children, both boys and girls, expressed an understanding of the legal guardians' primary role as being a contact person between them and the UDI. One boy stated that legal guardians should do more, arguing *"they have more information on the [asylum] procedures than we do. We live here without our families"*. Some of the boys stated the legal guardians were there to help them. When asked what they believed the legal guardians had the responsibility to help them with, one boy answered: *"The asylum procedures. We were told in the beginning that they would be here for us, but then we have no contact with them! I have met [my legal guardian] once"*.

One boy said the role of legal guardians was to talk to the UDI about the asylum process, but that this was only *"for show"*. When asked to clarify, he explained that, at registration, he had been told that his legal guardian would be there for him. But whenever he asked for help, whether to acquire a Tazkira or something else, he received no assistance from his legal guardian. He further mentioned only having met him once. As previously highlighted however, the children's expectations of their guardians did not solely revolve around the asylum procedures and contact with authorities, far from it.

“No one comes when I ask for help”.

Boy, on the role of legal guardians.

In two of the groups, boys stated the UDI had explained the role of the legal guardians to them when they applied for asylum; that the guardians were to be like their parents. One boy described the role of the legal guardian as being *“the same as [that of] parents. It means they are responsible for us”*. One disappointed boy followed up this statement with, *“The people living in this area treat us with more respect than our legal guardians do”*. One of the younger boys expressed that he did feel his legal guardian was like his father, while another boy had called his legal guardian “mother” as a sign of respect and had consequently been asked not to call her that. One boy explained, *“We were told that we would get a legal guardian that cares for us”*. He then proceeded to tell the group that his guardian had recently come to the centre, said hello to the boy, the boy had said hello back, and then the guardian had left: *“No communication. [...] I went to say hi to him, but he said nothing else”*.

In two groups, the boys were asked who the most important actors in the asylum process are. The UDI was mentioned in both groups, while the legal guardians were mentioned in just one. The group in which legal guardians were mentioned had children who were overall happier with their guardians than in the group where guardians were not listed. In the group where legal guardians were not mentioned, one of the boys, after consideration on who were the important actors in the asylum process, remarked:

“Myself. I am important”.

Boy, on important actors in the asylum process.

3.3 Norway as a destination

“Whenever we talk to the UDI or our legal guardians, this is the first question they ask us: Why did you come to Norway?”

Boy, on Norway as a destination.

Children were reluctant in all groups to discuss the reasons they came specifically to Norway. When the subject was broached, the atmosphere and demeanour of the children

visibly changed, and the answers became vague and often drifted towards the situation in Afghanistan. The topic was therefore not further examined, other than the question being asked to seek clarification. The subject was not broached at all in one of the groups. Establishing trust in that group was challenging, so the subject wasn't brought up to avoid alienating the children.

In the first group, the children mentioned that the main topic of discussion when first meeting UDI and their legal guardians was why and how they came to Norway. The children in all groups had different answers as to whether Norway was a conscious choice as a destination. Some of the children mentioned whether they had made the decision prior to departing their country of habitual residence or *en route*, but the question was not specifically asked, nor further explored in detail.

“I had heard the Norwegian government cares about and gives permits to children”.

Boy, on why he chose Norway as a destination.

A slight majority of the children stated that they had made a conscious decision to head to Norway. Some had heard they had a good chance of getting permits and staying in the country, while others had thought it was a better option than going to Sweden or Germany, where there were a higher number of asylum-seekers. One boy had stopped in another European country and hoped for better conditions in Norway, while others had picked Norway for their own reasons. As one boy stated:

“I came to the last country in the world, so that I wouldn't have to go back to my country”.

Boy, on why he chose Norway as a destination.

Several boys said they didn't have a strong reason for coming to Norway specifically, with a few mentioning they decided while already in Europe. A few boys, when asked, stated they didn't know why they came to Norway. Only two boys specifically mentioned smugglers, though others mentioned it "*was not our decision*" and "*we knew nothing about any of these countries, we just came,*" and "*I came to Norway on different types of transportation. This was the last stop*". A small number of children answered the question of why they came to Norway by stating that they hadn't known they were in Norway. They hadn't known exactly where they were, and two of the boys had been told they were in Norway by the police.

“When I was in the train, the police arrested me. They explained to me that I was in Norway”.

Boy, on whether he had picked Norway as a destination.

Both girl participants stated they had purposely decided to come to Norway. One had made the decision prior to leaving Afghanistan while the other had done so *en route*. They mentioned that they'd heard Norway was a safe country for women and girls, and one of the girls spoke of having a relative there. Two of the boys also stated they came to Norway because they had a sibling living there: “I came to Norway because my sister lives here.”

3.4 The future

“I do not have any hope for my future”.

Boy, when asked about his future.

When talking about their futures, the children in all groups, except for one, painted a grim picture. The only exception was the group of younger boys, who expressed a sense of hope when asked about the future. One boy mentioned he would like to benefit from a good education and wants to be a good person. One participant said he'd like to be a doctor while another boy stated that his future would be in Norway.

One boy mentioned he'd like to join the police force and contribute to Norwegian society, yet expressed apprehension about the renewal of his temporary permit, stating: “*If I don't get a longer permit, they will destroy my life and dreams*”.

“I would really like to live in Norway and be a policeman”.

Younger boy, when asked about his future.

Regardless of whether the boys were still awaiting decisions about their asylum applications or if they had received rejections and temporary permits, they expressed a sense of hopelessness and dread about what awaited them in Afghanistan. One boy said, “*When we hear news about deportations and returns, it feels hopeless*”. Several boys said they had nothing to say about their futures, as they couldn't think about it, or had no idea what fate awaited them: “*How can I think about the future?*” said one of the boys.

Several boys mentioned they had arrived in Norway with hope; the hope of being safe and having access to education. However, they said that ever since Afghan children had started getting rejections and temporary permits, *"it has negatively impacted our daily lives here"*. One of the boys spoke of the talents he and his friends had. He said that the situation had badly affected their futures and that *"they are killing our talents"*. He hoped to move to another country where he could use his talents and contribute to society.

The issues concerning boys leaving Norway for other countries, such as Germany or France, were raised in several groups. As one boy explained, 24 out of 30 recent decisions had been rejections and *"many of [those boys] are now in France or Germany"*. In one group, the boys expressed frustration that the staff at the centre had failed to give them hope or engage in conversation when this subject came up. Instead, the boys reported the staff had told them to make sure to leave their keys, bus cards, school books and anything that belonged to the centre behind if they chose to leave. The girls, on the other hand, pointed out that going to another country is not an option for them as it is for boys.

**"We are just gone. We are finished.
We lost our lives with these decisions".**

Boy, about the future.

As previously mentioned, several boys, as well as the girls, expressed having less motivation to attend school and those who still attended classes had trouble concentrating. One group explained that all the boys were in a rush to go to school on the first day; the bus was full and some didn't have a seat.

Since then, however, several boys received rejections, so school attendance has significantly dropped and now there are always seats on the bus. *"Only 10 or 15 are going to school now, some days only 2 or 4 of us [do]"*. A few children in several groups did mention they keep going to school as they feel it's important, or that they *"love it"*. One boy said he kept thinking positively and focused on school, as well as supporting his family in Afghanistan.

Some boys expressed fear that the police would come at night and take them to be deported. *"They are making us wait for 6-8 months [for our decisions], then they come and deport us during the night"*. One boy linked this fear to the temporary permits, saying they cannot think about their future, knowing they would be deported 1-2 years later: *"If we got a permanent permit, then we could think about it, but now we are just stuck"*.

"They say that a 1-year permit is a negative decision. They say that in 1 year, we will go back [to Afghanistan]".

Boy, when asked about temporary residence permits.

The temporary permits were in many cases equivalent to rejections. While a few boys did express relief at having some time to feel safe, they still found it difficult knowing they might get deported later. Having to stay in the centre with a temporary permit was confusing to some. As one boy put it, *"I got a one-year permit, but they [...] say I have to wait in the camp. What does that mean? [It means] that they will send me back to Afghanistan. My legal guardian said that I got a positive decision, but my lawyer said that no, I got a rejection, I will get deported. Most Afghans are in the same situation"*.

A few boys who had gotten temporary permits—and had viewed them as positive decisions—expressed that they weren't happy about them. As one boy explained: *"We don't have family here, but we have created a family with each other. If one of us gets a rejection from [the] UDI, it affects everyone here. Just like a family. We become hopeless, we have no future"*. Staff at the centres echoed this sentiment, adding that many of the boys who had gotten temporary permits felt conflicted; they were relieved for themselves, but felt bad for the other boys and didn't feel comfortable showing their relief or any signs of happiness.

The girls stated they thought a lot about the future, but that they couldn't do so in positive terms. They said they had difficulties thinking about anything other than waiting for their results, sometimes thinking they would lose their minds in the process. They also feared having the same problems they had left behind upon a possible return to Afghanistan.

**"It is better to die here than to be stoned to death
in Afghanistan".**

Girl, when asked about the future.

The boys also spoke of the situation in Afghanistan, either when asked about the future, their daily lives, Norway as a destination or in other discussions. They expressed frustration that the situation in Afghanistan was deemed safe by the UDI, saying that the war in Afghanistan has gone on for over 40 years and there are still daily bombings. They argued that Kabul *"is not safe anymore, it doesn't matter how old you are"* and that *"Norway says that when you are over 18, you have to go back. But the Taliban doesn't care how old you are"*. Several of the boys mentioned that options for their future were either being killed, joining an armed group or committing suicide in Norway. One boy declared: *"we know that we will die there. It's better for us to die here than to go back to Afghanistan"*.

4. Conclusions

“There is no one to hear us”.

Boy, on what they thought UNHCR needed to know.

The state of the children in the discussions was striking and alarming. The groups in which many participants—or their friends at the centre—had received rejections or temporary permits were the most vocal about their struggles and had a grim outlook on life. They were visibly burdened and very quickly began to talk about suicidal thoughts. In fact, in seven of the groups, children readily talked about suicidal thoughts, past suicide attempts, a sense of dread for what was to come and a lack of hope for the future. Additionally, in every group but one, at least one child bore visible scars from self-harm. In several groups, boys said suicides among Afghan UASCs in Sweden was a path they would likely follow. In fact, one of the discussions was interrupted due to an incident where one boy at the centre, who didn't participate in the discussions, attempted suicide and was taken to the hospital.

32% of the participants answering the questionnaire had received temporary permits while 6% had gotten rejections. According to the boys, temporary permits of 1-2 years were often perceived as rejections, and continuing to live in reception centres did nothing to alleviate that sentiment. The boys who had to acquire a Tazkira struggled with the costs involved, as well as with the practical aspects. While 54% of the participants said they were still waiting for their decisions, they also described the asylum procedures as a foregone conclusion; as Afghans, they were sure they'd be sent back to Afghanistan. Several boys said their situation in Norway had been fine, but had taken a drastic turn for the worse since the rejections and temporary permits had been issued.

“We would rather die [in Norway] than die in Afghanistan”.

Boy, about the future.

The children were eager to talk about their situations and said they wanted to be listened to and heard. They stated they were only ever asked about their cases. They also voiced frustrations with staff at the centres, the overall sentiment being that the staff didn't provide children with the assistance they needed. The fact that these teenagers are living together without their families in an unknown context could explain some of these frustrations. Nonetheless, not all the centres held regular house meetings where such

concerns about staff responsibilities could be addressed. Additionally, a few specific concerns were put forward by the children about where they should turn when their legal guardian is less than invested, while the staff deem the legal guardian responsible.

Although issues such as activities, access to healthcare, and tension with the staff were mentioned during the discussions, the main focus by far was the situation in Afghanistan, feelings of hopelessness and the future, or lack thereof. While conditions at the centres did arise—particularly in one group where there appeared to be serious concerns—the children mostly wanted to voice their fears about the future as well as a sense of loneliness. The fact that most of the children were less interested in talking about the conditions at the centres speaks volumes about their states of mind, and what preoccupies them.

“If we don't feel well, no one asks us what's wrong”.

Boy, on being alone.

Both the boys and girls stated that they supported each other respectively but expressed a longing for emotional support and practical assistance. These thoughts were often linked to the legal guardians, whom the UDI had explained would be like the children's parents. Those who were satisfied with their legal guardians primarily described the emotional support they were receiving. Whether they were satisfied or not, the children mentioned the legal guardians checking in on them, ensuring they were doing well and tending to their needs in case of illness. The way both the boys and girls talked about their legal guardians reflected their age; they are minors expressing the need for support and guidance from a trusted adult whose responsibility is to ensure their well-being.

“We are alone and living among the boys is a problem”.

Girls, on what they would like the UDI to know about the situation for Afghan girls in Norway.

The girls spoke of similar fears and heavy mindsets. They, however, bore the additional burden of being the only girls in a centre, outnumbered by boys. They too spoke of feeling alone, being unable to focus in school, fearing they would be sent back to Afghanistan, being driven to the brink of insanity waiting for interviews and decisions, especially hearing about the rejections or temporary permits among the boys. They also expressed a feeling that, as girls, they had fewer options at their disposal than the boys, e.g. heading to other countries such as France or Germany. The two girls spoke of leaning on one another and taking care

of each other, revealing that they were unsure how long they'd have the strength to carry on.

The discussion with the younger children however, is not reflected above. These children painted a vastly different picture and were less eager to share their experiences. They spoke of school, activities and doctors being readily accessible. When asked about their futures, they seemed able to consider the possibility of having professions and goals. That being said, as the group was comprised of 5 boys, conclusions about the situation for younger children should not be drawn based on that discussion alone. Moreover, one boy under the age of 16 participated in a discussion with older the children. While he said he was happy overall and was well taken care of, his arms told another story, as he bore scars from self-harm.



“Every day feels like the last day of my life”.

Boy, about the future.

THIS IS OUR VIEW

THE VOICES OF UNACCOMPANIED AFGHAN CHILDREN IN NORWEGIAN RECEPTION CENTRES

February 2017 - November 2017



UNHCR Regional Representation for Northern Europe

Please send your comments, questions and suggestions for future revisions to UNHCR Regional Representation for Northern Europe at swest@unhcr.org

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