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THE BLOG

We Must Open Our Eyes To The Injustices Facing Child Refugees

As we follow the plight of migrants on the US border and the Thai cave rescue, it is important that we also open our eyes to the injustices faced by child refugees

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ADAM BERRY VIA GETTY IMAGES

This past week Europe watched as Thai children were reunited with their families having been stranded in a flooded cave. Their successful rescue has flooded the media news stream and celebrations of a tricky, and precarious, rescue plan. Meanwhile, the world has reacted to images of children, sat in cages, separated from their parents, on the American/Mexican border. While protests have since lead to President Trump's rescinding of this particular policy, questions surrounding family reunification, and the treatment of

Refugee Reception Centres in the Aegean as part of our research project, [IR Aesthetics](#). The experiences of children, within and beyond these spaces, has occupied a central role in our findings. Unaccompanied minors are considered vulnerable. Therefore, they are provided with 'safe spaces' within Reception Centres. Yet these spaces are anything, but safe.

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Unaccompanied minors are provided additional provisions and protection within Reception Centres. In some cases apartments in towns house minors awaiting fast-tracking to the mainland, supported by UNHCR. Whilst programmes are put in place to fill the days of young people, it was suggested by officials that this was partly to keep them busy to avoid violence, most of these activities (schooling, football training, swimming lessons) are provided by over-stretched volunteers reliant on Centre cooperation to carry out these programmes. Provision is often divided along a number of lines, both gender, and children with families separated from unaccompanied minors. So whilst girls are provided with one hour of free time, boys can come and go freely. Programmes of education and activity often take place on different days for the different groups, with the relevant young people being bussed to spaces outside of the Reception Centres where they have far greater opportunities to 'be children'.

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Should the minors remain in camp, the conditions raise grave concerns. Safe zones exist within the camps to house unaccompanied minor boys and another for girls. Older women are also housed in this space but only once they prove they have endured violence to gain entry to such spaces. Protection is provided, but only after the violence has occurred. Boys, on the other hand are padlocked inside the space with guards put in place to ensure order. This is to proactively deal with drunken teenage behaviour which, we were told, can quickly escalate. Families outside of these 'safe zones' suffer additional layers of trauma and fear. In order to avoid potential sexual assault families (particularly women and girls) rely on plastic bottles as makeshift toilets within tents. Toilets, we were told, are only used during daylight hours.

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Adults, upon arrival, must prove the children are a relation. Children can be separated from the adults they arrive with, if the proper paperwork proving a biological relationship is not forthcoming. This, it was suggested to us, may be deliberate. In the absence of birth certificates and passports officials seek verification from the country of origin. In cases where neither of these options establish a relationship we were told of two cases

are not the only ones turning to DNA testing in migration cases, with the UK recently forced to apologise for carrying out similar procedures.

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Children must also prove they are minors. We heard stories of minors being moved from the protected area into the general population of the Reception Centre's when their age was put in doubt. Similarly, families that travel together but have an adult child are often separated as adult children are not deemed vulnerable and are thus housed in different places. We were even told of one case where separation took place whilst the adult child was undergoing surgery in hospital. On release he was not allowed to join the rest of his family. They had been moved to housing for vulnerable families. He continued his convalescence in the general population of the camp.

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The separation of families must be challenged regardless of age, experience, or situation. As the Children's Commissioner for England's recent report 'Skype Families' reveals it seriously hampers a child's physical, psychological, and social development. In the

and those within the Aegean have faced. So as we follow the plight of migrants on the US border and are compelled by the media story of the Thai rescue, it is important that we also open our eyes to the injustices of a system that relies on DNA testing and arbitrary discussions of age to separate families in times of sickness and trauma within Europe's borders.

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