



Let Their Voices Be Heard!

“Do you stay home?”

“Do you maintain physical distance?”

“Do you wash your hands?”

“Does school continue online?”

At the end of March 2020, our lives changed dramatically due to the COVID-19 health crisis. Amongst others, we had to stay home, wash our hands regularly (for at least 20 seconds!) and maintain physical distance, while students were called to continue their school classes remotely via online platforms.

But what does “stay home” actually mean for children who live in refugee camps or facilities for unaccompanied minors? How does one “maintain physical distance” when so many people are crowded into containers set up as temporary shelters? Is it possible to “wash your hands often and for at least 20 seconds” as a refugee who has to wait in line for access to water? How can school continue online for students that do not own a computer, whose entire family shares a single smartphone that often does not have service in the camps where they live, and when mobile data costs money?

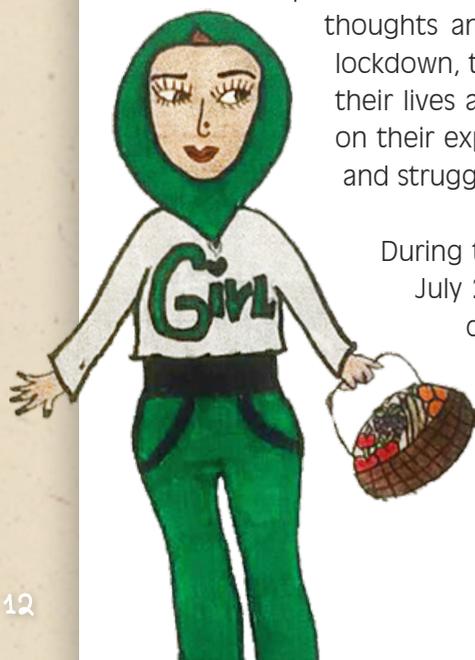
We wanted to explore how teenagers experienced the lockdown and confinement, recording their concerns, fears, and dreams, so we invited teenage refugees (boys and girls) living in various refugee accommodation centres, apartments and buildings across Greece to participate in online creative writing workshops.



Although it was easy to come up with the **idea**, given our previous experience with “Monologues across the Aegean Sea” (2016), its implementation seemed quite difficult, complicated by a tight time frame and the need to run everything online. After identifying teenagers interested in participating in online creative writing workshops, we needed to gain official consent by their parents or guardians. We needed educators to facilitate the online workshops and interpreters in many languages to support them. In addition to selecting an appropriate online platform, we had to ensure the teenagers could access and use it by obtaining and disseminating cell phones, tablets and mobile data packages. And, of course, it required a schedule that would be convenient for all the people involved living in lockdown in different regions across Greece.

The first phase of the action, the **preparation phase** (April 2020), was characterised by remarkable mobilisation efforts to find the adults who would act as “**local contacts**” between the organisers and the teenagers. Strong existing networking of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) with numerous people and organisations relevant to the project significantly facilitated the process. Educational staff at TENet-Gr, Refugee Education Coordinators, professional staff in the Greek public education system, UNHCR and NGOs, all enthusiastically embraced the idea and made it possible to get the online workshops up and running by 30 April 2020. Their contribution was tremendous – they located teenagers willing to participate, solved problems related to technology, communication and access, found interpreters, and so much more.

In the second phase (30 April – 18 May, 2020), the 24 teenage refugees (9 boys and 15 girls) who responded to the call, aged 13 to 19 years old from different backgrounds, coming from Afghanistan, Benin, Cameroon, Syria, Balochistan in Pakistan as well as of Egyptian, Iranian, Kurdish of Syria and Somali origin, were divided into three groups and took part in a total of 15 **online creative writing workshops** led by three authors. The teenagers stayed in refugee camps (Diavata, Thessaloniki; Filippiada, Preveza; Kara Tepe, Lesvos and Malakasa, Attica), in facilities for unaccompanied minors (accommodation shelters or apartments of supported semi-independent living) in the cities of Patra, Drama, Athens and on the island of Lesvos as well as in urban accommodation in Karditsa, Thessaly and Tripoli, Peloponnese as part of the UNHCR-supported ESTIA accommodation programme. The online workshops were supported by six interpreters (fluent in Farsi, Arabic, French, Somali, English) and 18 adults (teachers, psychologists, social workers, etc.), who acted as local contacts between the teenagers and the project coordinators. Through the workshops, the teenagers were encouraged to write short stories, narrations, diaries or poems in their native language, to draw and express thoughts and feelings about their experience in lockdown, the impact that the restrictions had on their lives as well as the effects of the lockdown on their expectations, aspirations, the challenges and struggles they face every day.



During the third phase of the project (June – July 2020), the writings and drawings produced by the teenagers were collected, **translated**, edited and prepared for **publication** in Greek and English, both in print and electronic formats.

The thoughts and experiences of all of us during the lockdown period were marked by strong contrasts. Among the first words that come to mind to describe this unique situation are confinement, interaction, separation, emptiness, isolation, free time, loneliness, exploration, thoughts, dreams, reflection and new plans. All these were also captured in various ways by the teenage refugees participating in the online creative writing workshops.

What is the lasting impact of this unprecedented lockdown and how did it shape our thoughts, feelings, and our general worldview, which is likely forever changed? What does the future hold – a trip, a reunion with loved ones, access to school or university? No matter what the dreams of these teenagers were, it is certain they matched the aspirations that each one of us had in terms of the life we would like to live and how that particular life has been redefined these past months.



We hope that the words of these teenagers will travel as far as possible; to be read as a thread in the tapestry of world literature or as testimonies of those who have lived through a historical event; to be brought to life on stage and in song and to inspire educational activities and interactions fostering deeper understanding, closeness and mutual respect.

We simply hope that they will “connect” at some level with every one of us.

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