

Looking for a better life: Yasmina's story¹

As night falls on the Albanian border with Greece, a group of children sets off into the mountains. Their destination: Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, a hundred miles to the west. Under cover of darkness, they will walk all the way.

Several thousand Albanian children, most of them Roma, are in Greece on any given day during the year. Many of the children return again and again to the country. Facing them is a life spent working and begging on the streets. The younger children – some as young as four or five – sell flowers and trinkets to tourists. By the time they reach the age of twelve or thirteen, a high percentage of the girls will have been forced into prostitution, and abused by the pimps and brothel owners who control them.

What pushes them is poverty and little hope for a better future. Albania has Europe's weakest economy, while neighbouring Greece has a thriving tourist sector. Twenty per cent of the Albanian workforce is unemployed and as many as 600,000 people have migrated in recent years. It is in this climate that the children leave to look for opportunities elsewhere, often with the knowledge and encouragement of their families.

Once on the streets and isolated from family and friends, the children are vulnerable to exploitation of many kinds. The challenge of helping them often falls to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like NPF ("Help the Children"). Tackling the problem first at its source, NPF identifies children at risk and makes sure they go to school, because there they will have a chance of learning skills that may help them to work closer to home; and there too they can learn that life across the border can be fraught with danger.

Namik Shehaj is Project Coordinator with NPF. He says the parents send their children to Greece because they see it as a way to earn money for the family. "This is a contagious disease," he says, "because you see your neighbour – he has sent his kid to Greece, he has gone there himself even – so you ask yourself: why shouldn't I send mine?"

That is what happened to 15 year-old Yasmina.² She has crossed the border a hundred times, and has spent much of her life on the streets of Thessaloniki. She remembers the first time: "I was four years old, too small," she says. "I was with a neighbour. He gave some money to my father and then he took me there – to Greece. My father told him: 'take my daughter and keep her there'. My neighbour, who's called Todi, gave my father 25,000 *leke* (US\$170 = about one fifth of average annual income in Albania), so it was like my father sold me."

Yasmina is not the only child in the household who left home. Her step-father, Agron, has been out of work for more than ten years. After two marriages, he has nine children. Of these, three daughters are in Italy. He has not been in contact with them for several years and he believes one of them may be dead. Yasmina, another daughter and two sons were taken to Greece by neighbours. Agron insists he sent his children away because he was poor and did not have a stable job.

It is unlikely he knew what awaited the children. But Yasmina saw it with her own eyes. "Today you have to make 5000 leke. You can't do it. It is night and you can't do it. You will sleep in the street. Then bad things happen. A girl will get screwed to make that money. And she doesn't tell the truth. She says she made the money begging."

While NPF supports children who have dropped out of school or are at risk of doing so, families are given financial support and help in finding jobs. Older children like Yasmina are provided with skills they can use to earn a living. She has learned hairdressing and tailoring, and hopes for help in setting up a shop. Only when children believe they have a future in their home community will the walk across the border end.

¹ Every day untold numbers of children around the world are exploited in the commercial sex trade. Many of them are far from their home communities when this occurs. Forced or voluntary relocation often occurs because opportunities for education or work are only to be found 'elsewhere'; and children who have been relocated or who choose to move are at high risk of sexual and other forms of exploitation. In 2000, the United Nations estimated that almost 13 million people are on the move – 2 per cent of the world population – and at least 700,000 of them, primarily women and children, are trafficked each year within or across international borders according to the US State Department.

² 'Yasmina' is not her real name. This 15 year-old girl was interviewed by a UNICEF film team sent to Albania to shoot video footage to be used in preparation for the 2nd World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Yokohama, Japan, 17-20 December 2001. The footage can be downloaded from the UNICEF website: www.unicef.org/events/yokohama