WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS FROM KOSOVO

Guidelines for Teachers, Social Workers, Youth Workers, Community Workers and Reception Project Workers

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of ethnic Albanian children and young people from Kosovo (Kosovars) have been arriving in Britain since the mid 1990's to escape human rights abuses and state terror. These children may have arrived from Kosovo itself, or from neighbouring countries or states, including Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece. Some of these youngsters have arrived seeking asylum with their parents. Others, mainly adolescent boys, have arrived alone and unaccompanied, after separation from their families. The character of oppression in Kosovo over the last few years made boys and men particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses from the Serbian state authorities.

After the outbreak of war in Kosovo women, children and the elderly also became the target of Serb oppression and increasingly found themselves being separated from their men folk, forced out of their villages and violently expelled from Kosovo into neighbouring countries such as Albania and Macedonia, or internally displaced within Kosovo.

Kosovan Albanians in the UK find themselves in an increasingly complicated situation regarding their immigration status. It is important for workers to understand the basis of these arrangements, as they will have a wide-ranging effect on the welfare and the future of different individuals and groups.

1. Kosovans who entered Britain prior to the outbreak of war, or who enter Britain now, and who apply for asylum in the UK.: these Kosovans are subject to British immigration law, currently contained within the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. The new Immigration and Asylum Bill, currently before parliament and likely to become law later this year, contains within it many measures that will significantly increase the difficulties in settlement faced by those seeking asylum in the UK. Workers will need to ensure they understand the implications of the new arrangements when they become law.

2. Kosovans who entered Britain as part of the government's humanitarian evacuation programme for Albanian Kosovans from Albania or Macedonia: these Kosovans were offered exceptional leave to remain for one year, plus support as part of a specially resourced programme.

This set of guidelines addresses some of the concerns and fears of those trying to meet the educational, social and developmental needs of Kosovan children.

Children's experiences

Kosovan children and adolescents are likely to have experienced some or all of the following:

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1 In this publication we have followed the Serb spelling of Kosovo, as this represents the region's current legal status within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, Kosovar Albanians refer to the province as Kosova. The precise spelling that a disempowered group chooses will hold symbolic value for that group. In this context spelling and pronunciation signify identity.
• massacres - violence directed at themselves and their families and community
• displacement from family home
• destruction of family home
• murder of family members
• rape
• tension in their parents
• changes in their parents
• displacement within the country
• long treks through dangerous and hostile territory
• extreme physical depravation
• displacement to a nearby country
• concerns about family members left behind in Kosovo or in neighbouring countries
• loss of parents, extended family, friends
• parents being unable to listen to and attend to their needs
• loss of the idea of adults as effective protectors
• loss of faith in their own role and capabilities.

All these children will have experienced individual and collective terror, violence, separation, loss, including loss of control of the basic physical and emotional necessities of life, and will have seen their lives profoundly changed. They may be extremely angry, anxious, distressed and sad.

Consequences

There are political, historical, social and personal consequences for each young person. Children will have views about adults using violence to solve conflicts. Children are generally aware that conflicts in communities may be about different beliefs and different values, or different access to resources. (If they are not aware, this will need explaining.) Children are also aware that adults may have a variety of responses to resolving conflicts and that there will be tensions between personal and collective, or communal, needs and interests. Children may articulate very adult political views, but they may alternatively feel "suffocated" by adults' political views and cut themselves off from adult concerns and responsibilities, even to the extent of regressing (behaving much younger than their chronological age).

Background on Kosovo

Both ethnic Albanians and Serbs have long connections with the eastern Balkans area known as Kosovo. Since the 10th century, Serbs and ethnic Albanians have managed to co-exist in relative harmony for periods of time, sometimes fighting as allies against a common enemy. However, there have also been many periods marked by bitter divisions along political, religious, linguistic and ethnic lines.

This century has witnessed the violent seizure of Kosovo by the Serbs in 1913, involving the torching of villages and massacres of Kosovar Albanians. The imposition of Serb rule followed and with it the development of various measures
designed to 'colonise' the region. Later, in 1954 during President Tito's rule, Kosovo was granted provincial autonomy, with the aim of checking Serb dominance in the newly created state of Yugoslavia. This limited autonomy was revoked in 1989 by Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian (then) Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, who was riding a rising tide of nationalism as communism collapsed across Central and Eastern Europe. From then and until June 1999, Kosovo was directly administered as a province of Serbia within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which is comprised of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro.

The 1990's have been characterised by the violent suppression and intimidation of Kosovar Albanians by Serb officials, military and civil, and with this the removal of many of their civil and human rights. In turn, this has increased the politicisation of the Albanian population, evidenced for example in widespread civil unrest that was initially non-violent, the call for a 'Kosova Republic' by wide sections of the population, and the formation of the Kosovan Liberation Army (KLA) in 1996. This followed the failure to mention the plight of the Kosovars in the Dayton Agreement that concluded the war in Bosnia. A popular and often violent struggle followed to liberate Kosovo from Serbia.

Before the outbreak of the recent war in Kosovo, 90% of the total population of nearly two million were ethnic Albanians. The majority of Kosovars are Muslim and speak Albanian (which they call Shiqip). The Serb population is mainly Orthodox and speaks Serbian (sometimes referred to as Serbo-Croat). The major differences between ethnic Albanian and Serbs in Kosovo are cultural, linguistic and religious as well as about perceptions of who holds power in the region.

Over the last nine years Kosovans have been subject to increasingly violent and intense forms of human rights abuse, which have included: house raids and confiscation of goods, arbitrary arrests, police violence including physical assault, summary imprisonment, torture by electric shock and other means, and summary executions. These have taken place alongside a systematic programme of Serbianisation of Kosovo, which has included the imposition of the Serbian language in schools and universities, the suppression of most Albanian-language publications and press, the closing of libraries holding Albanian books, the suppression of Albanian-medium radio and TV, the Serbianisation of most local place names and the destruction of Albanian cultural institutions.

Types of repression during war changed, intensified and became far more systematic. In Kosovo to date they include, forcible driving out of large sections of the Kosovan population from their homes and from the region, the use of Kosovars as human shields, the separation of men from women and children, seizure of property including the seizure and destruction of personal identity papers and passports, house and village firing, destruction of crops, starvation, murder, rape, massacres, summary mutilation and executions.

In some villages all males, including boys as young as six years old, were targeted for killing. In others, all sections of the community - male, female, young or old, able-bodied or disabled - were massacred. These horrific actions were part of a

2 Kosovans refer to the KLA as Ushtria Clirimtaree Kosoves (UCK).
systematic programme of ethnic cleansing of the region by the Serbs, and are regarded as acts of genocide in international law.

For workers here in the UK, it will be important to develop an understanding of the impact of the different forms of repression and violence on the individuals and communities they are working with, and the internal and external resources that people have for dealing with these experiences. Different forms of violence and repression may have different effects on different individuals. These events may be very difficult to talk about, and for some they may be literally unspeakable.

Social level

During the latter part of this century there have been changes in the structure of Kosovan life. On one hand the traditional agricultural way of life in the countryside predominates, where it is common for extended families of three generations to live together within small cohesive communities. In the countryside patriarchal values predominate, and fathers have the last word. On the other hand, there is also an emerging urban population that is developing a new way of life. University education has brought changing attitudes, reflected in smaller families and more independence for women.

Family life, both in the countryside or town is very important, including rituals for eating together, drinking coffee together and spending time together. Communal meals are very important. Although the vast majority of Kosovars are Muslims, religious practice is not of central importance.

Education is very important in Kosovan life, and like many other areas of life in recent times, it has become highly politicised. Thousands of teachers were sacked from their posts, along with doctors, health workers and other public employees in 1990, for protesting against various state measures, including the imposition of a new Serb curriculum that denied Kosovan Albanian children an education in their own language reflecting their history, culture and educational aspirations. In response to this, Albanians established a 'parallel' education system, often run in private homes. Teachers continued to be subject to intimidation, arrests and beatings by the Serb police. As a consequence all youngsters are likely to be highly politicised and to have gaps in their education.

For workers here in the UK it is important to ensure that they develop a clear understanding of the social and educational backgrounds of the children and families they are working with, so that they are able to make good assessments of need and thereby develop appropriate services.

Personal consequences

These children have experienced enormous violence, losses and changes in their lives. Their parents or carers may have changed in their capacity to parent. Both parents and children will now be living with great uncertainty about their future and about the welfare of family members from whom they are separated. Huge numbers of children have become separated from one or both of their parents. Wives are separated from
husbands and other close family members. They do not know if these separations are temporary or permanent, including separation from their homeland, which is of critical importance to them. They will have had very little opportunity to make sense and develop an understanding of these experiences.

Children may show difficulties in their behaviour and in their emotional life. They may have difficulties in:

- controlling behaviour
- concentration
- sleeping
- eating
- they may be very aggressive, or withdrawn
- they may be very angry, sad, frightened, isolated or confused
- they may feel a deep sense of difference, that they are strangers and that this is irrevocable
- they may feel humiliated by regression in their development, e.g., explosiveness, low tolerance of frustration, bed-wetting
- they may need specific help to deal with difficulties of engaging with peers or with education
- they may need help integrating with other national groups
- in general, they are likely to show uneven development, i.e., sophistication in some areas and regression in others.

Some workers may find they will need to be able to help Kosovan Albanian children and young people address their angry and vengeful feelings towards other ethnic groups from the region, in particular Serbs and Kosovan Roma (Gypsies) whom they may come into contact with in various situations, including the classroom, hostel accommodation or in the community at large. These children may think about acts of revenge they wish to carry out, while some may act on these wishes. This situation needs to be addressed within a human rights framework, through discussions and teaching about tolerance, difference, prejudice and conflict resolution.

Ways of helping and supporting

The most therapeutic event in the life of a refugee child is to feel part of the school and local community, to be integrated and to be able to learn and make friends. Any programme of support for refugee children needs to be able to address both the children's vulnerability and their capacity for resilience. Support needs to be geared towards the protective factors in the child's internal and external world that will reinforce their resilience. The five essential factors that protect children are:

**Belonging:** being linked to an involved adult - parent, a parent substitute, or a befriender.

**Reflecting:** being able to reflect on your past and present experiences and the feelings connected with those experiences. This involves adults and peers involved in supportive listening and help with play, using both verbal and non-verbal means of creative expression, e.g., art, drama, music, storytelling.

**Being active:** being actively involved in making choices about various aspects of life.
Refugees are often in situations where they are helpless and powerless. Children need to regain a sense of personal effectiveness and can do this only if they are consulted about events that affect them and their families.

**Identifying:** support in feeling part of a Kosovan community.

**Integrating:** feeling part of the local community.

Most of these children do not need direct therapeutic work with professionals. Their difficulties are a natural response to extreme and grotesque events. They do need consistent, supportive, listening adults who can give them involved attention. This supportive listening can be carried out individually or in groups. It is important that children and adolescents have opportunities for play, and for creative activities and self-expression, alongside opportunities to talk about past and present difficulties. Many refugee children find facilitated group work, where they can share their experiences and concerns with other refugee children, very helpful because this makes their responses to their memories of horror seem more normal.

It is also important to reassure people about confidentiality, that this form of listening is private and will not be shared with the community and gossiped about. An example of misguided helpfulness in this context might be a worker bringing together two people from the same community and sharing details from their lives without first asking if they want to meet, or asking if they have given permission for their private concerns to be shared.

Workers need to take a holistic approach to their work, moving from the individual to the family, to the social, political and historical levels of explanation. Mental health professionals have an important role in supporting adults, such as teachers, youth workers, reception centre workers, play workers, etc., involved directly in working with refugee children. It is important to recognise that Albanians from Kosovo will have had little experience of UK community child mental health approaches, and these will therefore need careful explanation.

Interpreters and community-based advocates are a vital resource for communication, and developing understanding and knowledge for both community and professionals.

Any supportive work with refugee children that is therapeutic in its purpose needs to support the development of resilience. This work can be effectively carried out by adults who meet children in their daily lives, such as teachers, community workers and youth workers.

**Workers’ concerns and getting support**

Workers supporting refugee children often feel isolated and that they must meet every need they recognise. It is important to identify who in your organisation or community works with refugee children and parents, and how you might work together and meet different needs. This work can be emotionally draining. Workers are likely to feel upset and overwhelmed when they are listening to experiences of violence and loss. All workers need training, both around the needs of refugees, as well as how to use and find personal support. Those working intensively, for instance in reception centres, will need regular group consultation to prevent workers becoming overwhelmed. Their need for regular support should be viewed positively and not as a forum for highlighting
workers' weaknesses or inadequacies. The support may take the form of monthly group or individual consultation. Groups could be facilitated by local community mental health staff or by workers in specialist organisations who have an understanding of refugee issues such as:

The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture  
Star House  
104-108 Grafton Road London NWS  
Telephone: 020 7813 9999.

Provides survivors of torture in the UK with medical treatment, practical assistance and therapeutic support. Offers specialist services for children and adolescents, including assessments and case work. Training for education, play and youth services, health and social services on the emotional and psychological needs of refugee children. Also offers a fortnightly discussion and support group at its London office for teachers and others who work directly with refugee children.

Networking

Being able to develop a good network of appropriate support for refugee children is time well spent. Apart from key national organisations, each local area will have a range of different statutory, voluntary and non-governmental organisations, as well as community groups.

It will be useful to identify key people in health, education and social services, such as the relevant Principal Officer, Inspector, Advisor or Refugee coordinator. Organisations such as your local library, your borough's race or equality unit, a local Race Equality Council office, etc., are good starting points for finding information about local support agencies and organisations in your area.

It will be very important to establish good working links with any Kosovan community in your area. As far as Kosovan children and their families are concerned, any work that can be done to strengthen the capacity of these organisations will be very helpful, as they will be at the forefront of providing support for newly arrived members of their communities. Additionally, much helpful advice and cultural understanding can be offered by the community to support workers. However, workers and organisations need to recognise that Kosovan community groups are only relatively recently established and will be under enormous emotional, social and financial pressure.

Useful addresses

The Refugee Council  
3-9 Bondway  
London SW8 1SJ  
Tel. 020 7820 3000, 020 7735 8941/4

Disseminates information about refugees in Britain and abroad. Provides training for educational institutions nationally. Also provides practical advice for refugees and refugee advisors on all aspects of refugees' lives in the UK. [Refugee Council]
Advice Line: 020 7346 6777
*Advice for refugees, asylum seekers and people working on their behalf*

Education: 020 7820 3108
*Information, advice and resources for schools. Training for teachers and others who work with refugee children within education. Campaigning around asylum issues and children.*

Children's Section/Panel of Advisors for Unaccompanied Children: 020 7820 3000
*Advocacy/ legal advice and befriending for newly arrived unaccompanied children.*

Communication Group/Advocacy Unit and Information Team: 020 7820 3000
*Campaigns and lobbies on refugee issues. Publications, reports & fact sheets.*

*Web: [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)*

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**Irish Refugee Council**
Arran House  
35 Arran Quay  
Dublin 7 Ireland  
Tel. [+ 00 353] 01 724 433

**Midlands Refugee Council (West Midlands)**
1st Floor  
Smithfield House  
Digbeth  
Birmingham  
Tel. 0121 622 1515  
Fax 0121 622 4061

**Scottish Refugee Council**
94 Hope Street  
Glasgow  
G2  
Tel 0141 248 9799  
0800 0856087 (advice line for clients)  
Fax 0141 333 1860

**Scottish Refugee Council**
200 Cowgate  
Edinburgh  
EH1 1NQ
Welsh Refugee Council  
Unit 8, Williams Court  
Trade Street  
Cardiff  
CF10 SDQ  
Tel. 01222 666250

North East Refugee Service  
19 Bigg Market  
Newcastle upon Tyne  NE1 1UN  
Tel 0191 222 0406

Northern Refugee Centre  
Carver House  
2 Carver Street  
Sheffield  S1 4FS  
Tel 0114 275 3114

Amnesty International (British Section)  
99 Rosebery Avenue  London  ECI 4RE  
Tel. 020 7814 6200  
A worldwide human rights organisation. Amnesty International produces a wide range of published material and is engaged in human rights education. It has youth and student groups.

Barnardos  
Policy Planning and Influencing Unit  
Tanners Lane  
Barkingside  
liford, Essex  
IG6 1QG  
Tel. 020 8550 8822  
Runs nationwide projects within the community, supporting and working with children, young people and families, including unaccompanied asylum seekers.

British Red Cross  
International Welfare Department  
54 Ebury Street  
London  SW1W 0LU  
Tel. 0171 235 5454 (Family Reunion Section)  
Casework to enable family reunion, resettlement, family tracing and family messages.

The Children's Legal Centre  
University of Essex  
Wivenhoe Park  
Colchester,  
Essex  C04 3SQ
Runs a national help and advice line Mondays to Fridays, giving legal advice on any issue that affects children and young people in England and Wales.

The Children's Society
Edward Rudolf House
Margery Street
London WC1
Tel. 020 7402 5157

Commission for Racial Equality (Head Office - London)
Elliot House
10 Allington Street
London SW1 SEH
Tel. 020 7828 7022
CRE works to eliminate racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity among different racial, ethnic and national groups. Officers available to provide frontline advice and assistance. Runs a youth campaign. Local and regional offices.

Family Service Unit National Office
207 Old Marylebone Road
London NW1 5QP
Tel. 0171 402 5175
Community-based family support work aimed at preventing family breakdown, including work with asylum seekers. Units in London, the Midlands and the North.

Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA)
Lindsay House
40/2 Charterhouse St
London EC1M 6JN
Tel. 020 7251 8383
ILPA holds a list of solicitors who are experienced in immigration law.

International Social Service of Great Britain
Albanian Youth Action Project
Cranmer House
39 Brixton Road
London SW9 6DD
Tel. 020 7735 8941
Inter-country casework services for social workers and others. Tracing relatives abroad. Services for unaccompanied young people. London-based Kosovan Project for young people. Support for capacity-building for local Kosovan community groups in the UK. Training for education, social and health services.

Language Line
18 Victoria Park Square
London E2
Tel. 020 8983 4042
Language Line provides interpreting services in 140 languages to public service providers,
including the Home Office and the Benefits Agency, as well as to refugee and other organisations. Language Line is an immediate service, and generally can provide an interpreter within 90 seconds.

Law Society Children's Panel
The Law Society Ipsley Court
Berrington Close
Redditch B98 OTD
Tel. 0152 754 4416

Save the Children
17 Grove Lane
London SE5 8RD
Tel. 020 7703 5400
Works in over 50 countries worldwide. In the UK it works with young refugees in London and Oxford and provides resources on working with refugee children, including leaflets for adults and children on the asylum process and legal representation.
Website: http://www.savethechildren.org.uk

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UK/UNHCR)
Millbank Tower
21-24 Millbank
London SW1 4QP
Tel. 020 7828 9191
Promotes public awareness of refugee issues and coordinates humanitarian aid to some refugee populations. Advice in the UK on obtaining recognition as a refuge. Advice on family reunion. Educational resources available can be found on the web at http://www.unhcr.Ch/teach/teach htm

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
55 Lincoln's Inn Fields
London WC2
Tel. 020 7405 5592

Young Minds, Children's Mental Health Charity
102 Clerkenwell Road
London EC 1
Tel. 020 7336 8445
Resources

The Refugee Council publishes a very useful nationwide directory of services and resources, Refugee Resource Directory, for any person or organisation working with or providing services to refugees and asylum seekers.

Children


Adults


