

Layla, a 16 year old Afghan asylum-seeker living in Athens

Layla's Afghan family lived in Iran for many years. Indeed, she was born and lived all her life there before setting out on the journey that brought her to Greece.

She has happy memories of her life in Iran. "I lived in Mashad. It was very beautiful. We visited other places in Iran such as Neyshabur, Tehran and Gila. People were kind and helpful. There was lots of greenery and delicious food. Gila is historical. Like the Acropolis, we have ancient Persepolis.

"I used to go to a little mosque in Mashad where I could speak with God alone and in peace. It had beautiful, gold-framed windows through which I could see the mountains and the running water. I went there every other day for two to three hours. I could not go more often."

Layla's mother is a widow. Her husband died seven years ago. Fearing that her family would be forced to return to Afghanistan after the end of the Taliban rule, Layla's mother decided to seek asylum in Greece, with her four sons and Layla.

The asylum procedure in Greece usually takes two years, but on occasions has taken five or six years. Most asylum applications are rejected in Greece. In the meantime, Layla and her mother have been granted temporary residence and work permits.

They have been assigned a hostel situated on the outskirts of Athens. The hostel is also home to other refugee youth from various nationalities. "My friends are the teenagers here at the hostel," says Layla. "We cook Iranian dishes and sweets. We take part in hostel activities and eat with everyone else. I like to write and I keep a diary. Every week, I write about the previous week. Besides Greek classes, there are dance classes. I am the only teenage girl at the hostel. There are over a dozen teenage boys. That makes me the boss!"

Apart from being the only girl in the group of refugee youth at the hostel, Layla is quite different from the others. The boys have a pragmatic approach to life. To avoid depression, they prefer not to dwell on things too much, neither on their past nor on their future. Layla is reflective and seems preoccupied with cultural differences between Iran, Afghanistan and Greece. The boys simply see life in the West as better than wherever they came from in central Asia.

Unlike her new friends at the hostel, Layla would like to return to the place where she grew up and lived (Iran), despite the increase in freedom in democratic Greece.