

## MODULE 6. MOTION IN PROGRESS

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### Capsule 2. Harraga

The term migrant childhood refers to children who move between countries, accompanied by a family member or without the care of an adult. This type of immigration is not an isolated phenomenon. These children undertake the migration process in most cases alone, as we have seen in the research we have carried out in Morocco. Among the main reasons that cause children to migrate are: the absence of social rights and protection in their countries of origin, the lack of future prospects, impoverished contexts or domestic violence, among others.

The number of people entering Spanish coasts through unauthorized points has increased significantly in 2018. In 2017, a total of 28,578 people entered the Spanish territory through unauthorized points, of which more than 22,000 people did so by sea, whereas in the previous year the number of people entering by sea was 8,048. In addition to this almost threefold increase, it has become clear that in 2017, compared to the previous year (2016), there has been a 66% increase in the number of minors - mostly of Moroccan origin - who have entered Spanish territory, with 7,053 minors entering Spain in 2018 compared to 3,803 minors in 2017. This represents 11% of the total number of people entering through the Southern Border in 2018.

At the European level, according to data from the European Migration Network, between 2014 and 2017, 219,575 children arrived unaccompanied by an adult family member in the EU and Norway and

applied for protection. In addition, at least another 48,000 children arrived on the continent and fell outside the child protection system. The main countries of origin are Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, Iraq and Somalia and around 11% are girls.

Spain is the south-western border of Europe and as such receives the arrival of a large number of migrants and refugees. Children and young people who experience migration processes, alone or accompanied by their families, are exposed to a multitude of risks and experiences that threaten their rights and their lives. Suddenly leaving their homes, losing loved ones or witnessing multiple situations of violence are experiences that mark the emotional development of these children and adolescents.

On 17 and 18 May 2021, thousands of people entered Ceuta, many of them minors. According to the official sources of the Spanish National Police, 920 minors have been registered and transferred to the resources set up in the city of Ceuta. Foreign minors must be protected and listened to as a priority, guaranteeing their full care and protection, according to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, different international treaties and Organic Law 1/1996, of 15 January, on the Legal Protection of Minors and Organic Law 8/2015, of 22 July, on the modification of the system for the protection of children and adolescents. However, in the management of this border crisis by the Spanish government, which has as its background the bilateral relations between the kingdoms of Spain and Morocco (as we saw in capsule 1), the protection of unaccompanied minors by the reception system was not correlated, but in many cases the illegal expulsion of these minors to Morocco took place. This was prompted by the declarations of the King of Morocco, Mohamed VI, who instructed that all identified unaccompanied Moroccan minors should be returned to Morocco.

For years, the city of Ceuta has had only one center for minors, the Temporary Relocation Centre known as "La Esperanza" where approximately 300 minors reside there. This resource was intended to respond to the special reality of the thousands of minors in migratory transit in Ceuta. However, the lack of educational and qualified staff, the ineffective and highly questionable educational methods used, the overcrowding and lack of space, the collapse in the regularization of their documentation, and a long etcetera, already meant, at that time, a failure in terms of protection, reception and defense of children's rights. This situation was especially aggravated with the arrival of Covid-19, due to the fact that, during the months of confinement, even more harmful practices were carried out for these minors. These included the creation of inadequate and unhealthy spaces where it was not possible to respect the security measures of Covid-19 due to overcrowding, and where different types of violence were exercised against the children by the staff. Santa Amelia is a sports centre, where approximately 200 minors lived, and was set up during the pandemic to house minors, but was later closed again. Following these events came the belated response of opening another centre for minors, "Piniers", where approximately 70 girls and young boys reside there.

After the overflow and collapse of the Protection System, in May 2021, the hundreds of minors were left in the care of the city of Ceuta. The city of Ceuta set up three warehouses, formerly used to store goods, to house approximately 500 minors. These are managed by the SAMU Foundation (a private company providing health, social action and emergency services) and EULEN Group (private company providing security, cleaning and maintenance services). The distribution of places that house minors in these warehouses was based on the results of antigen tests given to minors once they arrived at the facility. There is one bay for positive cases, one for close contacts and one for negative cases.

The three warehouses bordering the border were set up and have a fast access route to the neighbouring country - a non-common entry and exit route through which, allegedly, minors have been returned illegally (“expulsiones en caliente”). These warehouses are made up of a single room each, where all the minors are crammed together, once again, in unsanitary conditions which we will detail below and which violate the children's rights.

The space designated to house the minors is neither dignified nor adequate. It is a total and absolute impoverishment of their protection resulting in overcrowding, unhealthiness and malpractice. Minors continue to be exposed to high vulnerability and risk. Minors were held 24 hours a day in these spaces, without being allowed to go out or engage in any activity other than sitting in bed or wandering around the space. The buildings have no ventilation or windows where sunlight can enter. The only time they are outdoors is to go to the mobile toilet or showers.

In addition, there is an undetermined number of minors who are not in the protection system and who are in a street situation. There are hundreds of minors hidden in different parts of the city (the port area, forests, mountains, breakwaters, hiding places inside the city and in peripheral areas; in every neighborhood...). There is only attention for these minors from civil society: neighborhood groups, individuals, independent associations and volunteers, but there is no response from the government.

The majority of children living in the street are between 16 and 17 years old. Many of them verbalized that they wanted access to a protection center but that their main concern was that once identified, they would be sent back to Morocco. After the entries from 17 May onwards, a large number of minors were returned irregularly, many of them against their will and against any international treaty.

Civil society is taking on a responsibility that is not its own but which, due to state inaction, is proving to be one of the most successful and beneficial interventions for children. Faced with the crisis in May 2021, some families in Ceuta covered the basic food and clothing needs of the children who arrived in Ceuta. Most of these host families, as a civil society initiative, have some link or close relationship with the child's biological family in the country of origin.

Some foster families refer to the fear of being criminalized and persecuted by the administration. Even though they are convinced of the need for the humanitarian and reception work they carry out, the criminalisation of migrants, both at an institutional level - with a large police and military deployment in the streets of Ceuta - and at a social level - an increase in hate speech and rejection towards this group - makes families feel that they are committing a criminal, harmful or dangerous act, as the collective imaginary makes them believe that they are "harbouring criminals".

Both minors in street situations and minors informally taken in by families make it difficult to count, identify and know the situation of these unaccompanied minors in Ceuta.

The fact that there are minors outside the state protection system, especially those in street situations, can trigger serious cases of violence such as child exploitation, sexual abuse, neglect or even the disappearance of the minor. Any unidentified minor is automatically outside the supposed guardianship of the State, which in this case corresponds to the Autonomous City of Ceuta.

Every day that there is no rapid, effective and adequate response to minors living on the streets, we are moving towards the stratification of a spiral of violence around these young people.

## TEXT SOURCES:

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