

MODULE 6. MOTION IN PROGRESS

Capsule 2. Unaccompanied foreign minors

The following contents concern direct experiences with minors received in the two projects managed by Arci Lecce Solidarietà in different towns of the province of Lecce: UASC (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors) and SAI (Reception and Integration System).

The first interview with the minor who has just arrived is essential. It creates a necessary first ground to retake awareness of space and time and emotionally connect in a place of protection and listening.

For a child who has been migrating for some time, it is important to recognize and be recognized within a protected relationship.

Regaining possession of a name, a story, a narrative which, fractured by the experience of migration, begins to exist again outside oneself and takes place within a positive relationship. Telling one's own migratory story defines a time and place of a suspended existence. The listener is the witness who gives life and restores its contours.

The arrivals of unaccompanied minors in the last three years have undergone a significant increase. The variations concerned the geographical origin, the gender, the reasons for the get-away and the migratory route. The condition of vulnerability is therefore specific and related to various individual, cultural and migratory experience factors, which constitute a traumatic condition exacerbated by exposure to experiences of violence, deprivation and abuse.

Data

On 30 June 2021, 7,802 migrant minors were present in Italy: an increase of 55.5% compared to the same survey period of the previous year. Similarly, although to a lesser extent, there was a slight increase of 7.3% compared to the same survey period in 2019.

As of December 31, 2021, 12,284 unaccompanied foreign minors were present in Italy, a figure in sharp increase compared to previous years. They are mostly male; over half are seventeen, just under a quarter are sixteen.

There are many reasons that lead minors to leave their countries. For some of them, migration is a real and sometimes sudden get-away from systematic violence, discrimination, armed conflict, persecution. In other cases, departure is encouraged and decided by the family, in a context of multidimensional poverty in which the only expectation of change is the children.

Whatever the motivation that drives them, minors in transit live in a particularly vulnerable condition and often remain stranded in the trafficking network.

Citizenship

Starting from actual data and direct experience, we will try to focus on the nationalities of origin. We will plot not only a geographical but also an existential route that will lead us to know the reasons why Italy could be just one stage of an endless journey.

The main countries of origin of UASCs who entered Italy in 2021 are: Bangladesh (2,843 minors), Egypt (2,221), Tunisia (1,560), Albania (1,186) and Pakistan (784). These five citizenships represent more than two thirds of UASCs present in Italy (70%). The citizenships that recorded the most substantial increases compared to 2020 are the

Egyptian (+ 219%), the Bangladeshi (+ 82.5%) and the Tunisian (+ 18%). The attendance of minors of Albanian citizenship, although increased by 22% between 2020 and 2021, remained however far below the number reached at the end of 2019. Followed by Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Gambia, Nigeria, Eritrea.

Gender

The gender difference is also a determining factor in the reasons for departure, in the migratory project and in what happens in transit.

Female migration mainly affects minors fleeing Somalia, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, victims of a violent and seriously abusive cultural, family and social context. All the minors from Somalia and most of the Ivorian women have been subjected to female genital mutilation, fleeing forced marriage and gender-based violence. The migratory flight of Somalis is strongly determined by the presence of serious armed conflicts linked to the presence of Al-Shabaab.

The stories of inhuman violence are inscribed in the physical and psychological scars of minors, which cause deep-rooted existential wounds. Nigerian minors and a part of Ivorian women are victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation: "meat for slaughter" in the prostitution network. Almost all of them arrive via the Libyan route, which often turns out to be hellish and abhorrent. The time spent in Libya is on average one year, even two. It is necessary to promptly intercept any trafficking indicators, at the time of disembarkation and during the early stages of reception, in order to avoid the recruitment of minors for the trafficking of prostitution in Germany, Austria, France and Italy.

Bangladesh

As for the arrivals of male minors, the routes are diversified. Minors from Bangladesh left their country at least two years before arriving in Italy, but the migratory path they report is roughly identical to that of Africans.

The starting context and the reasons for the flight mainly concern multidimensional poverty, aggravated by serious natural disasters such as floods. Generally, families contract a debt with local usurers, linked to organizations that deal with human trafficking. Relying on the promise of a job in Libya that can allow the debt to be settled, the minor is entrusted to the traffickers. From Bangladesh they reach Dubai by plane, after a few days they leave again with a stopover in Tripoli and from there they are taken to detention facilities, deprived of documents and subjected to severe labor exploitation (mostly unpaid). The jailers, both of Libyan nationality and compatriots, subject minors to torture and severe violence: this often done in a video call with the family, in order to solicit payment. Many of the Bangladeshi boys report that they did not leave with the intention of reaching Europe but that they were forced to take on a further debt to reach Italy and escape the funnel of Libya's death.

In this migratory framework, it is possible to understand how the minor who arrived in Italian territory is still in an existential order of escape. The debt incurred by the family to repay, which often amounts to several thousand euros, weighs on the boy's shoulders. The only clear goal upon arrival is the need to find work at any cost: thus, it is easy to fall prisoner of trafficking for labor exploitation.

Egypt

As regards the reasons that push Egyptian minors to migrate to Europe, they are mostly of a strictly economic nature, particularly

mandatory in areas with a strong rural vocation from which most of these minors come. Being able to financially support their families by sending money remittances, or even just being able to pay for the marriage of a family member is a driving force for migration with a strong socio-cultural value.

Despite the undoubted involvement of the family in the migration project, most of the minors interviewed say they have decided to migrate independently. Only a few report that the decision regarding the departure was influenced by the family. The reason why Italy turns out to be only a stage is sometimes purely economic and pushes these young people to join their compatriots established for some time in Germany or France.

The migratory route of the Egyptians is the Turkish one, where they generally stay for the time necessary to continue the journey and reach the Italian coasts.

Tunisia, Pakistan

Lonely minors from Tunisia belong to disadvantaged and destitute social classes. The average age is seventeen and the migration path is different and very short. They embark directly from the Tunisian coasts on dilapidated boats, headed for Sicily. The minors from Tunisia are those who mostly try to flee to France hoping to reach the communities of compatriots established there for some time.

For minors from Pakistan, as well as for Bangladeshis, the reasons for migration relate to: multi-dimensional poverty, climate and environmental problems, violent family feuds or discriminatory issues regarding their emotional and sexual orientation. Pakistani minors are also victims of trafficking and severe labor exploitation and have a substantial travel debt. The countries crossed are Iran and Turkey. Here they stay for at least a year working as slaves in clothing factories for about 12/14 hours a day and a salary of around 300/400

euros. Then they reach Greece, escaping the violent Greek police, embarking towards the Italian coasts, on a journey of three or four days. The journey takes place on small boats, which could hold a dozen people, but often take hundreds of them on board. Upon arrival, exhausted and confused, they are tuned in to the need to reach a place where they can work and repay the travel debt.

Sense of childhood

An important consideration is that the migrant child, of whatever origin mentioned, is not aware of being a "minor" as understood in the cultural, social and legal sense known to us. They are children without childhood, forced to become adults prematurely, lived in conditions of deprivation in the fields of health, education and standard of living. Young people who provide for themselves or for family support from the age of six or seven.

A transposition of the cultural sense of childhood, adolescence and rights is not obvious and simple. For the majority of young migrants in Italy, the status of a minor is not clearly translatable and understandable in the cultural background of origin. Providing clear information on what it means to be a minor in Italy, not only in the legal sense but as a recognition of a social role, is very important: that's why the help of a mediator is essential.

Vulnerability

The minors welcomed in our projects arrive highly vulnerable, since the alienating experience of isolation in quarantine ships or hotspots, mostly militarized, which extends and amplifies the traumatic experiences already lived in Libya or in the places of detention of the migration routes (Turkey, Greece). The first phase of reception is extremely delicate and important.

The physical landing of the migrant minor does not always coincide with the psychic landing. He needs a period of adaptation and stabilization that allows him to emerge from a condition of self-crisis determined by the migratory experience. Finding himself in the neuropsychological structure of escape and survival, he needs professional support aimed at reconstructing the functions of the self that allow anchoring to the present and real future planning.

Many minors arrive with severe post-traumatic psychological vulnerabilities, scarring from torture and complex health conditions. The experience of detention in quarantine places risks chronicizing his symptoms and exposes him to the risk of being intercepted by the dense network of trafficking in sexual and labor exploitation. The experience of decontextualizing the psycho-physical development of the adolescent outside the cultural context of origin is a reason for suffering and destabilization. Therefore, it is important to always provide clear reference points, in terms of both people and the environmental context (services, formal and informal resources), giving detailed information on the place where they are located and on the various professional figures who deal with them. This "orientation" function needs to be developed in the following days and months, until the child acquires a real awareness of the situation in which he finds himself and is able to bring out perplexities and concerns to which an adequate response can be provided.

Arci Lecce Solidarietà experience

The Arci Lecce Solidarietà experience with minors in the SAI of the heel of Puglia - which has always been a place of migration, movement and hospitality - leads me to a human and professional reflection. The place of departure and arrival is determined by innumerable reasons, some in common and others specific. The stories, the faces, the places left and imagined, the looks, the bated breath, the violated bodies and the deep eyes that I have met in these years of work, push me to

affirm that what allows those on the run to stop and catching one's breath is, on an existential level, perceiving oneself alive, free and safe. This condition can only be experienced within a human and professional relational space. And it can only be consolidated in the presence of an adequate territorial response and a good welcome such as to allow the minor a sense of self-efficacy, determination and belonging, essential for achieving existential goals.

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