



**WP2 Study on post-pandemic attitudes, behaviours, and understandings of youth, manhood, and gender relations
Mapping the EU / Needs Assessment**

**X-MEN project
Spanish case**

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Structure of the report

This report explores different aspects related to the legal and social situation of unaccompanied migrant minors and young adults in Spain. First of all, we present the methodological perspective we used, describing the research techniques we adopted. Then, we analyse the legislation that applies in the case of such minors and we give a picture of the social situations, underlying the vulnerabilities they experience. The second part of the report is devoted to an analysis of the fieldwork realised between the two shore of the Mediterranean Sea: Teotuan (Morocco) and Andalusia (Spain) with both experts and minors/young adults without family references. Results are presented on post-pandemic attitudes, behaviours, and understandings of youth, manhood, and gender relations of such youngsters.

Methodology

The information and materials analysed to write this report was gathered between February and July 2022 through different techniques. The Spanish team of the project started with desk research, digging into academic works, policy documents and reports developed by International and Third Sector organisations specialised in migrant children/adolescents that migrate alone.

Since the implementation of the project activities will be in the Autonomous Communities of Aragón and Andalusia, special attention was devoted to policy briefs and materials from these two regions.

Individual interviews and focus groups were carried out with people with different profiles in order to gather qualitative information and personal narratives that permit us to build a comprehensive picture of the legal and social situation of children and adolescents that migrate alone in Spain. 35 persons in total were involved as interviewees in this phase of the project at both the individual and group level.

Individual interviews were organised with professionals of the sector, policy makers and experts as reflected in the table below.

Individual interviews with professionals/policy makers

Interview Number	Date	Place	Position/Organization
1	5/4/2022	Zaragoza	Childhood and Adolescence care service of the Government of Aragon
2	5/4/2022	Zaragoza	Childhood and Adolescence care service of the Government of Aragon
3	6/4/2022	Zaragoza	Educator, programme 17+, Fundación Cepaim.
4	6/4/2022	Zaragoza	Social worker, programme 17+, Fundación Cepaim.
5	6/4/2022	Zaragoza	Programme for minors and residential facilities, Fundación Ozanam

6	22/4/2022	Online (Madrid)	Migration department, UNICEF Spain
7	18/05/2022	Online (Madrid)	Jurist expert in human rights, childhood and intersectionality
8	08/06/2022	Tetouan (Marruecos)	Almahabba wal Ikhlasse Association for orphans
9	09/06/2022	Tetouan (Marruecos)	Consejo Independiente de Protección de la Infancia (CIPI)
10	09/06/2022	Tetouan (Marruecos)	Educator
11	06/07/2022	Sevilla	Anthropologist specialized in migrant children without family references and homeless
12	11/07/2022	Sevilla	Pedagogue and educator

One focus group with professionals of social interventions with children and youngsters that migrate alone was organized in Zaragoza (Aragón) the 22nd of June in the Youth Centre of the city. Eight professionals participated, employed in 5 organizations SOS Racismo Aragón, YMCA, Fundación San Ezequiel Morebo, Sociedad Cooperativa Prides and Fundación Cepaim.

Concerning **migrant adolescents, individual interviews and focus groups** were organised and carried out in Sevilla, Tetouan and online. In Sevilla, 3 individual interviews were held with migrant young adults participating in an emancipation programme run by Cepaim Foundation.

Group interview with migrant adolescents without family references

The field trip to Tetouan (Morocco), that took place between the 6th and the 11th of June 2022, was organised to attend the IV international seminar on cooperation for development in the North of Morocco titled “Migrant adolescents without family references: beyond the legal age” and to carry out some fieldwork. In Tetouan a focus group was conducted with 10 youngsters aged 17-23 years old without family referents and educated by third sector organisations. The

focus group was held the 9th of June and was not recorded given the necessity of creating a safe space for the participants and their will of not recording the interview.

Another group interview was held online the 16th of June with 2 members of the association Ex-Menas that gather migrant youngsters formerly under the guardianship of the State. Also in this case, the meeting was not recorded for the same reasons as the case mentioned before.

The Cepaim team decided not to pass the questionnaire based on the GEM scale out. When we faced the interaction with Moroccan boys we realized the GEM scale tended to clash with the principle of interculturality by which we approached the research. That is because the scale's structure and language was very far away from the cultural codes of these minors, adding to this the difficulty of the translation. We resolved to focusing on qualitative research, much softer and accurate technic in order to catch the migrant minors subjectivity. In general terms, the access to the field is a delicate issue, on the first hand because of the frame of this population created by right-wing parties and forces and the preoccupation with overexposure of organisations in charge of them. On the other hand, the status of minors is a factor in itself that complicates the access to children and, depending on the Autonomous Communities that have the responsibility of giving them legal and material protection, they are more or less approachable.

Despite the initial objective of involving only minors in the project, the Cepaim team decided to extend the age to young adults older than 18. The ampliation of the age range is due to different reasons. First of all, many of the youngsters started their migration process when they were underaged but became 18 before entering the Spanish protection system. The transition from being minor to the age of majority is a legal and bureaucratic question that put them in very different legal positions, nevertheless, from the youngsters' point of view, they don't automatically become adults when they turn 18, they are still young people in need of care and protection. In fact, in many Autonomous Communities¹ there are programmes aimed at accompanying these young adults until they become autonomous and emancipated. Moreover, it is important to follow them in this delicate transition and find out what happens to them and which needs are not covered by public policies.

¹ They are the first-level political and administrative division with the aim of guaranteeing some autonomy of the nationalities and regions that constitute Spain.

The researcher Álvaro Garriga and the participants in the focus group in Tetouan (Morocco)





Legal definition of migrant unaccompanied migrant minors

The defining characteristics of the status of "unaccompanied foreign minor" from a legal point of view are:

- a) being a minor;
- b) the absence of a responsible adult;
- c) the status of immigrant.

The intersection of these conditions defines the legal uniqueness of the unaccompanied foreign minors and the States have the obligation to adopt the necessary measures to ensure the protection of the minors as such. At the same time the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for migration policy. The different regional systems (Autonomous Communities) are in charge of the development of child protection systems.

The EU Council Resolution 97/C 221/03 of 26 June 1997 on unaccompanied minors who are nationals of third countries defines such minors as: "third-country nationals below the age of eighteen, who arrive on the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult responsible for them whether by law or custom, and for as long as they are not effectively in the care of such a person". Being accompanied in Spain does not mean that these minors do not have families and referents in their home-country, on the contrary, it is important to understand the socio-economic and family reality that accompany these children in their place of origin; this situation is fundamental in order to understand the magnitude of this phenomenon and its particular difficulties.

The legal framework of child protection gives some legal and life security to foreign minors arriving in Spain, however, this protection is undermined by provisions linked to migration policy, such as procedures "relating to the first reception of children and their identification and registration by the police authorities; the determination of age; and finally, the question of access to a residence permit" (Ceriani Cernadas: 2021, p. 18). As Unicef (2019) points out, migration laws regulate the main aspects of the treatment of unaccompanied migrant children much deeper than child rights protection laws. This derives in certain limitations of the

regulations on children and some contradictions observed in the procedures implementing the legal framework.

Migration regulations complicate the obtention of legal residence of third countries nationals, nevertheless an important legal change was promoted in 2021 with the Royal Decree 903/2021 that modified the Regulation of the Law on Immigration with regard to the legal regime for minors and young people of foreign origin under guardianship, creating a specific residence regime for them, with the aim of facilitating their legal documentation and articulating ways to favour their integration and inclusion (FEPA 2022).

The main changes introduced by it, in relation to young people of foreign origin under guardianship, were: speeding up access to valid documentation, extending the validity of residence authorisations, recognising in all cases the right to work from the age of 16 and facilitating and simplifying the accreditation of economic means and other requirements for renewals. Another of the most important aspects of the Royal Decree approved is that it allows young people of foreign origin between 18 and 23 years of age and who are undocumented to benefit from the new legal text (FEPA, 2022).

According to the Directorate General for Migration (cit. in FEPA, 2022), when the reform was approved, a total of 15,000 unaccompanied minors and young foreigners under guardianship were expected to benefit from it. According to data provided in February 2022, since the entry into force of the reform of the Regulation until 20 March 2022, 8,960 applications have been received in the immigration offices at State level, of which 2,247 applications from minors and 4,129 applications from young people have been favourably resolved, 209 have been rejected and the rest are being processed.

Procedure to obtain the legal guardianship

The protection of foreign minors without family references, that lead to the Public Administration guardianship, starts with the Declaration of Abandonment (Declaración de Desamparo) by the Autonomous Communities. These are the authorities in charge of the formal declaration of the homelessness/helplessness of the minor, necessary for undertaking the guardianship of the children and guaranteeing their access to the minors' protection system and services. Despite the different duration of this procedure durations depending on the Autonomous Community, there is a maximum time limit of three months that must be respected



for the assumption of the guardianship by the public entity of protection of minors (Accem, 2022).

Once the minor is officially declared in a situation of Desamparo, the Public Administration acquires the guardianship and the minor is provided with basic attention, like clothing, food, education and accommodation. NGOs or religious institutions, financed by Minors' Protections Services, are usually responsible for ensuring the provision of these kinds of services framed around the child's best interests, even if there are also public run facilities. The vast majority of unaccompanied migrant minors are accommodated in centres and to a far lesser extent in families. Residential centres can be classified into: first reception centres, basic residential centres and specific centres.

Age identification is essential for access to protection: if the migrant is recognised as a minor, he or she can generally be assisted by an ad hoc guardian or legal representative administrator and enjoy certain protection measures by the public authorities. This restrictive category covers only those minors who arrive without "a responsible adult" who can take care of them according to law or custom. The restrictive nature of the term "unaccompanied minor" does not reflect the reality of these minors arriving in the EU; and the diversity and complexity of situations in which they may find themselves. Such diversity and complexity should be taken into account to guarantee the care of minors (Serrano Caballero, 2018). We will further discuss the age identification process since it is acknowledged as a factor of vulnerability for the migrant minors.

The guardianship systems for unaccompanied minors show some limits, among others, regarding the obtention of valid documents to legally reside in Spain, like the long duration of the procedures for issuing a valid identification document when children are undocumented. Moreover, serious concerns have been reported regarding children who have been under the guardianship of the Autonomous Communities and are evicted from protection centres once they turn 18 even if they have not been documented or have not yet received a residence permit. In such cases, children are forced to live on the streets, homeless and undocumented (Accem, 2022).

Beyond the legal definition and protection, these persons are also the result of a social construction that is increasingly capable of hiding the complexity embodied by each minor, with their personal, social and educational background. Jiménez and Vacchiano (2011) underline that these minors constitute a unique category: they are both minors who are subjects of law, and foreigners who are objects of control, to be monitored and repatriated, embodying two almost opposing aspects: minors to be protected and irregular migrants to be expelled. International and national "child protection" standards establish that all children who are legally



unaccompanied should be under the protection of the State. The presence of unaccompanied migrant children highlights the contradictions of Spanish and EU migration policy and asylum and refugee policy with child protection systems as well as the controversy over the externalisation of European borders. According to the actual legal principle, these "unaccompanied foreign minors" must be protected given their condition as minors and asylum seekers, and as foreigners they must be controlled.

The invention of the legal-political category of immigrant children under the protection of the State has the aim of equalising rights and, therefore, equal opportunities with Spanish children, but at the same time migrant minors are framed in an original inequality that makes this equalisation impossible. This category, in which these young people are placed, has not been accompanied by other facilitating mechanisms that could help them in their incorporation into society. This has led to a kind of legal isolation that has caused blockage, insecurity and marginalisation, and has prevented and prevents these young people from evolving well in the new society (Calvo, Shaimi, 2020, p. 125).

Unicef (2019) underlines that it is migration (foreigners) laws, not child rights protection laws, the one that regulate the main aspects of the treatment of unaccompanied migrant children. This explains some of the limitations of the regulations on children and some of the contradictions in the procedures implementing the legal framework.

This tension between protection and expulsion is used by extreme right-wing groups and parties to create social alarm for electoral purposes. In the regional elections of Madrid held in May 2021, the Vox party installed electoral advertising in which it compared the money spent on a retirement pension with the money spent on maintaining minors under the administration's care in residences, regardless of their origin. "A MENA² 4,700 euros a month, your grandmother 426 euros pension/month", was read next to the image of an old woman and a young man with their faces covered with a hood and a scarf, and the party's electoral slogan, "Vox protects Madrid. Vote safe". The Madrid Public Prosecutor's Office opened an investigation for a possible hate crime in the Vox electoral poster, nevertheless the judges considered that the far-right group expressed its ideas "by means of a visual message of impact" and did not harm the dignity of those affected. "We do not consider that these messages were intended to harm the dignity of a certain group - the so-called MENAS - but rather to expose ideas through a visual message

² The acronym means "unaccompanied foreign minor" and it is used as a political category that constructs these children as a social problem. The acronym leads to dehumanization and to conceive them as a whole, a collective of people with the same characteristics and homogeneous life experiences. Such conception means that the treatment (institutional, personal, social, professional, in the media) can be in terms of stigmatisation and criminalisation.

of unquestionable impact, together with other texts on VOX's official profiles on Twitter and Facebook in which the importance of the security of citizens in general and the economic protection of the elderly is highlighted, and that all this constitutes an ideological-political line that is made clear in the texts included in the appeals", the court decision affirms.

During our research we could find different ways of naming migrant unaccompanied minors. We report here those that incorporate the tension toward respect for these children and youngsters, and underline the status of unprotected children/adolescents.

- Unaccompanied migrant children;
- Children that migrate alone;
- Migrant adolescents without family references in Spain;
- Children and adolescents in a situation of human mobility

Vox electoral poster against unaccompanied minors.



Source: https://www.eldiario.es/politica/racismo-ideologia-orientacion-sexual-centran-delitos-odio-pese-caer-denuncias-confinamiento_1_8175111.html

Autonomous Communities framework: Aragón and Andalusia

In this section, we consider the policy frameworks of the two Autonomous Communities where the X-MEN project is being implemented: Aragón and Andalusia. The two regions show very different dimensions of the phenomenon. Out of 12,417 minors registered under the guardianship or foster care of the protection service in 2019, Andalusia received 4,617 minors and Aragon 208 (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2020, p. 882).

According to Unicef (2019) the residential centres forming the protection system in the Spanish territory are very heterogeneous. This does not depend only on the regional responsibility that means that each Autonomous Community has its own network, but fragmentation is also within each region. substantial differences from one centre to another can be found even in the same Community or province-. Differences can be found also in the quantity and quality of the services provided in each centre, in the composition of the work team, the activities carried out, the possibility or not of processing the residence permit in due time, among many other aspects. These differences build inequalities in the level of protection and implementation of rights depending on the facility in which a child is received.

Aragón

The Aragonese Institute of Social Services (IASS) is the public body in charge of foreign minors' protection in the region. The IASS collaborates with different institutions that provide knowledge and perspective beyond the local sphere: The University of Zaragoza and the Observatoire de la Migration des Mineurs (CNRS-Migrinter, France). This collaboration led to a participatory process in 2019, which resulted in the publication of two documents: the "Guide of recommendations for professionals"³ and the report "Ensuring the right to information for

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https://www.aragon.es/documents/20127/2152324/Gu%C3%ADa_profesional_menores_migrantes.pdf/a4281930-c4ae-2972-172b-02fac80da54a?t=1657532942989

unaccompanied minors (ADIMENA) in Aragón”⁴. In 2022, the “Aragonese strategy for children and adolescents travelling alone” was also published⁵.

In the Strategy, the gender perspective is present at different points, nevertheless masculinity or the work specifically with boys is not named. Within the first strategic line “First assistance and reception”, the objective 1.7 aims at incorporating the gender perspective and affective-sexual diversity in first assistance and reception. The following measures are named:

1.7.1. Designing a specific procedure for the initial assistance and reception of girls and female adolescents who migrate alone.

1.7.2. Drafting of an information guide on the detection of situations of vulnerability of girls and female adolescents who migrate alone.

1.7.3. Drawing up a collaboration agreement with organisations specialising in child and adolescent female migration in contexts of specific vulnerability.

1.7.4. Incorporation of a specific area of work on the gender perspective and affective-sexual diversity into the centre's plans.

1.7.5. Incorporation of content on the gender perspective, affective-sexual diversity and female youth migration into the annual training plan (line 5).

1.7.6. Incorporation of the gender perspective into the Working Group on the adaptation of shelters to EQUAR standards⁶.

Gender is understood most of the time as girls and female adolescents, but there is no reference to the social construction of masculinity that affects boys.

When dealing with training of professionals, there is no mention of gender needs nor perspective in this field.

Beside the protection on foreign minors, there are programs aimed at the transition into adulthood. Law 26/2015, of 28 July, on the modification of the child and adolescent protection system, establishes in article 22 bis that Public Bodies must offer preparation programmes for independent living to minors close to reaching the age of majority and young people formerly

⁴ <https://omm.hypotheses.org/files/2020/10/Asegurar-el-Derecho-a-la-Informacion-de-los-Menores-No-Acompañados-ADIMENA-en-Aragon.pdf>

⁵ https://www.aragon.es/documents/20127/2152324/Estrategia_Menores_Migrantes.pdf/06e81923-b4fe-05ec-2080-6d415c49c640?t=1657532454978

⁶ EQUAR: Estándares de calidad en acogimiento residencial [Standards of quality in residential care].



under guardianship. This means the consolidation of programmes that already had a large trajectory in Aragón.

Currently, young adults are supported through the following programmes:

- a) PLAN FOR TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENT LIFE (PTVI)
- b) YEI PROGRAMME
- c) PROGRAMME 17 PLUS

The PTVI and YEI programmes are complementary to each other and cover minors of any nationality. Programme 17 plus is specific for unaccompanied minors.

The quoted guide, “Niños, niñas y adolescentes que migran solos. - Guía de Recomendaciones para Profesionales”⁷, highlights some difficulties, some of them important for the X-MEN project:

- In order to prioritise the preventive work of these programmes, and to prevent minors from entering exclusion circuits, it is proposed to extend reception, in general, until they are regularised and in contact with their own programmes (when possible) or with other resources in the territory (p. 17).
- The opening of new shelters is accompanied by the incorporation of professionals with no previous experience in the field of protection of migrant minors, so training is needed.
- Measures are needed to remedy the current shortage of specialised educators in some of the residential centres, with special attention to the specific protection centres for minors with behavioural problems.
- Improvement of the working conditions of professionals in the System of Assistance for Children and Adolescents in Aragón, especially those who work in specific residential centres.

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https://www.aragon.es/documents/20127/2152324/Gu%C3%ADa_profesional_menores_migrantes.pdf/a4281930-c4ae-2972-172b-02fac80da54a?t=1657532942989



- Educators highlight the difficulties in recruiting intercultural mediators who can work in different areas (health, employment, education, housing).
- As with the rest of the adolescents living in Aragón, there is a lack of available resources in the field of mental health.
- In some cases, a risk of ghettoisation is detected in some educational resources where there is a high percentage of this profile of children (especially in post-compulsory education).
- The lack of links with the community is noted, as the children's references revolve excessively around the guardian organisation and professionals (IASS coordinator, educator at the centre, etc.).

Andalusia

Andalusia does not have specific centres for the care of foreign minors. The programmes dedicated to residential care are carried out under equal conditions for all minors under the care of the Administration. However, it is true that in practice there are several centres that provide immediate foster care with greater specialisation in the profile of migrant minors without family references. In this sense, in June 2015, the Directorate General for the Elderly, Children and Families of Andalusia set up an Emergency Care Plan for Immigrant Minors. This Plan coordinates actions and material resources at regional level. However, organizations working in the sector consider essential to rework this plan with the participation of all the administrations and agents involved in the care of migrant minors without family references, since the plan has proven to be clearly improvable, especially because it is based on a map of residential resources that is deficient. In other words: more places are needed given the high number of minors that reach the region.

In 2017 given the saturation of the "Immediate Reception Centres" of the Andalusian child protection system, the Junta de Andalucía has opted to contract the so-called "Emergency Centres" on a temporary basis under direct contract with the organisations Engloba, Fundación



Samu, Anide, Afinsa and Interprode. These centres are not officially within the Andalusian protection system (Andalucía Acoge 2019, p. 44).

Andalucía Acoge (ibid., p. 45) denounces bad practices such as:

- Centres that, either because of their geographical location (they are far from socialisation resources and services) or because of their large number of places, are far from optimal assistance for children in foster care.
- Difficulties in accessing health care, schooling or other basic services.
- Insufficient staff, with precarious working conditions and sometimes with little training to attend to children individually.
- A high number of absences (runaways) and the management of these absences. Some of them are related to human smuggling or trafficking.
- Slowness, or non-existence in some cases, in transfers to the basic residential resources of the Protection System.
- Minors who have been released from these centres after reaching the age of majority without any file being processed, so they are not considered to be “formerly under the guardianship of the State” and do not have any type of documentation or access to resources of legal age.

As in Aragón, also in Andalusia the local government has developed the Programme +18⁸ for young people who are or have been under guardianship, being able to be beneficiaries from 18 to 25 years of age.

⁸ <https://www.extutelados.es/empleo/programa-18/>.

Who are unaccompanied migrant children and youngsters in Spain?

According to the last data available, as of 31 December 2021, 3,048 minors were registered in the Register of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (Defensor del Pueblo, 2022).

Unaccompanied foreign minors in Spain 2009-2021

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
4.507	4.378	3.623	3.594	2.841	3.660	3.341	3.997	6.414	13.796	12.417	9.030	3.048

Source: Defensor del Pueblo 2022, p. 17

Nevertheless, the data for 2021 are not very accurate as the annual report of the State Attorney General's Office points out. The pandemic situation has affected the proper registration and recording of minors in the registry, moreover there are still delays and deficits in the information that the protection authorities must provide on minors who leave the protection system.

We refer to data of 2019 to have a clearer and more accurate picture of unaccompanied minors. In the Register of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, as of 31 December 2019, a total of 12,417 minors were registered under the guardianship or foster care of the protection services. Of these, 11,329 are boys and 1,088 are girls. There has been a decrease of 17.88 % compared to the 13,796 registered in 2018 (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2020, p.882).

According to the Registry data Andalusia takes in 4,617 minors; Catalonia 1,977; 1,398, Melilla; 777 the Basque Country; 691 the Valencian Community; 712 Ceuta; 489 Madrid; 262 Murcia; 421 Canary Islands; 208 Aragón; 151 Castilla-La Mancha; 98 Galicia; 117 Cantabria; 79 Asturias; 86 Castilla y León; 71 Balearic Islands; 209 Navarre; 45 Extremadura and 9 La Rioja (Ibid.).

Considering those who arrived by boat, during 2019 2,873 arrived in this way, with a significant decrease (-59.10 %) compared with 2018, when 7,026 minors reached Spain by boat. Most of these unaccompanied minors are male (2,683 = 93.38 %), the rest are girls (190 = 6.61 %). Most of them are from Morocco (1724 = 60 %), followed by 882 Algerians (12.28 %), Guineans (9.60 %), Ivorians (182 = 6.33 %) and Malians (160 = 5.56 %). These figures refer exclusively to minors arriving in Spain in very precarious boats (Ibid., p. 881-882).

The profiles of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents are complex and diverse. One of the main concerns of the experts interviewed for the X-MEN project was precisely not to reduce these youngsters to a single homogenising dimension. Motivations and processes to migrate are diverse and can include:

- Migration culture (Barros et al., 2019).
- The lack of labour perspective, the family poverty /socioeconomic status, domestic and/or gender-based violence within the family (Belattar, 2014), gender identity and/or sexual orientation.
- A family strategy aimed at improving the socio-economic status of the unit (Hadjab Boudiaf, 2017).

The diversity these youngsters represent is undermined by a homogenising process that reduces them to a single profile linked to violent, criminal and addictive behaviour. Such stigmatisation results in a dehumanizing framework for these minors promoted by extreme right-wing forces.

A significant proportion of unaccompanied minors in many OECD countries experience severe difficulties not only in gaining access to education, but also in receiving basic services, and as a result may be particularly vulnerable to poor educational attainment and low levels of social, emotional and motivational well-being (OECD, 2017).

Some of them experienced vulnerability already in the countries of origin, but the migration process can mean an intensification of different kinds of violence, such as the separation from their context, family and communitarian bonds; the way in which they travel – it can be by small boats or under a truck, among other and safer ways -; or realizing that their expectations will not be fulfilled, that they will go through a profound frustration and insecurity within the protection system. Under these circumstances, blockage and disorientation at different levels become structural characteristics in their lives (Calvo, Shaimi, 2020, p. 122).

Vulnerability factors that make the lives of migrant children/youth more precarious

We understand vulnerability as a constitutive/ontological condition of human beings: human lives are possible only in connection with others, in a relationship of interdependence. In this sense, all human beings are vulnerable, such vulnerability needs care to be resolved and care is given by people. Human beings are those who resolve vulnerability and also an important role is played by policies that contribute to the social organisation of care. However, we can highlight those elements that build or increase vulnerability and turn it into precariousness, i.e. all those elements that depend on political and social decisions and processes.

First reception

For most cases, the entry route into the protection system is through contact with police officers: a minor has to go to a police station, state that he/she is a minor and ask for protection. In many cases, the police do not take the young person into custody and denies the request without this act being recorded in any registry. This first contact with the police is often experienced with fear and a lot of uncertainty given the very different treatment children and youngsters can receive.

The following phase, that is the declaration of abandonment, which is necessary to enter the State protection system, is sometimes unjustifiably delayed and the child may reach the age of majority without having been taken into guardianship. Sometimes these delays are related to those linked to age determination. These delays in processing guardianship can lead children to leaving the protection centres and leaving the system (Unicef 2019).

Determination of age

Age determination is important for access to the child protection system, but also for other issues such as access to secondary education. Children arriving alone in Spain are not automatically declared unaccompanied and are not automatically placed under guardianship until their age is determined by the Public Prosecutor's Office. Sometimes, even after the



determination of their minority, guardianship can be delayed for several months, although this procedure is exceptional.

The procedures followed to determine age, according to the Ombudsman (2021, p. 48-49), take a long time, leaving a large number of minors waiting for months for this procedure. The Ombudsman stresses the need "for the Prosecutor's Office to introduce reforms to the age determination procedure so that it is carried out as quickly as possible". Unicef (2019, p. 17) highlights how the medical tests used have a wide margin of error, some being invasive, and are applied without any consultation with the child. These are almost always radiological (radiation) tests that do not give reliable results and do not assess the psychological maturity of the persons. Secondly, in the case of incorrect identification, if the minor is deemed to be of legal age, either because of his/her appearance or because of an error in the tests, he/she is exposed to living on the street, being detained, expelled from the country or placed in a Detention Centre for Foreigners (CIE)⁹, which implies a deprivation of liberty against the law (UNICEF, 2017).

No alternative to medical tests to determine age is sought in an interdisciplinary approach. There is some abuse of the tests that are carried out even in cases where there is no doubt about the child's minority, and in situations where the child has authentic documentation proving his or her identity and age. The minor is not informed about the procedure, nor does he or she have access to legal assistance.

Residence permit

Obtaining legal residency in Spain is one of the priorities for minors. In several cases, there are delays in beginning and following up the residency procedures and/or in their timely renewal, particularly at times or in places where a considerable number of children arrive in a short period of time. Children are aware of the importance of the residence permit, nevertheless they don't often receive detailed information on the procedure, and they cannot be personally in charge of it or have access to their record. Moreover, the lack of legal assistance and representation means that they cannot use this channel to obtain legal residence (Unicef 2019, p. 18).

⁹ As a general rule, unaccompanied minors cannot be expelled from the country or placed in the so-called "Detention Centres for Foreigners" [Centros de Internamiento para Extranjeros CIEs].

Health

Access to healthcare

Health care is available in the residential centres, but it is very limited. Migrant minors are not issued with a health card until their guardianship is constituted and they are transferred to other residential centres. This hinders minors' full access to the health system, leaving them severely unprotected in any kind of health need.

Mental health

The coronavirus pandemic affects the physical and the mental health, particularly of the most vulnerable in this latter case, including children and adolescents. According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is a fundamental component of health, the latter being understood as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Mental health is defined as a "state of well-being in which a person develops his or her capacities and is able to cope with the normal stresses of life, to work productively and to contribute to his or her community".

Children and adolescents without adult references suffer from great social vulnerability and, therefore, have an increased risk of suffering from mental disorders, even more so in the current pandemic context (Unicef, 2021). They embodied many risk factors for mental health problems: from the unrecognised lethal risk of a journey to Spain, to the contact with the protection system that will leave many of these children out on the streets. Once living as homeless, the pre- and post-homelessness stressors accumulate in each young person generating a situation of such stress that there is a high risk of mental health damage with consequences that could be lifelong (Calvo, Shaimi: 2020).

Residential exclusion

The transition to adulthood is a problematic phase for these youngsters. The model of child and adolescent protection ends up expelling young people and condemning them to the street, a model that shows an inability to cope with difficulties.

Moreover, even if they are still minors entitled to State protection, there are often escapes from the centres where they live. According to the data of the National Missing Persons Centre (CNDES) (2022, p. 26) there are 8,106 cases of minors absent from centres in Spain (total for years 2010-2021) as of 31 December 2021.

MOROCCO, WITH ALMOST 63 %, IS THE MOST REPRESENTED COUNTRY, FOLLOWED BY ALGERIA (10 %). THERE ARE 82 DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES

Morocco		5.098	— 62,9%	Albania		23	— 0,3%
Algeria		841	— 10,4%	Sierra Leone		22	— 0,3%
Guinea		778	— 9,6%	Ghana		16	— 0,2%
Mali		468	— 5,8%	Mauritania		15	— 0,2%
Côte d'Ivoire		320	— 3,9%	Nigeria		13	— 0,2%
Gambia		83	— 1,0%	Guinea-Bissau		12	— 0,1%
Cameroon		77	— 0,9%	Equatorial Guinea		11	— 0,1%
Senegal		72	— 0,9%	Burkina Faso		10	— 0,1%
Romania		38	— 0,5%	Rep. of the Congo		10	— 0,1%
Somalia		29	— 0,4%	Others		170	— 2,1%

Source: CNDES 2022, p. 49

In 2018 3,699 minors got missed, the highest number since the data is collected. The number drops to 1.768 in 2019 and to 493 in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 96 % of these minors are male. In 2021, the lowest figure in the last five years was recorded with 313 cases. The Andalusian coastal provinces are the ones with the highest number of reported cases. Cadiz, in particular, accounts for more than 51% of the cases registered at national level (ibid.,



p. 45-46). At the European level, the European Migration Network reported that more than 65,000 migrant children went missing in Europe between 2014 and 2019 (Fundación Raíces, 2020, p. 13). To date, no exhaustive investigations have been promoted to dig into the institutional violence suffered by children and adolescents residing in child protection systems, which still do not have effective complaint mechanisms available to report aggression and to claim for protection from violence, nor have they promoted studies on the causes of the disappearance of children from protection resources, making it impossible to attribute responsibilities or find out the location of many of them (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the report by Fundación Raíces (2020, p. 52), based on data of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, points out that, among other factors, escapes are based on mistreatments children receive in the residential centres. The types of assaults reported by children include body blows, punches, kicks to the stomach and head, stomping on the head, shoving, hitting with batons, unnecessary and prolonged shackling and even biting. These physical assaults, according to the children, are often preceded or accompanied by humiliation, which the children perceive as attempts to provoke them into reacting in some way to justify the subsequent assault. Insults, references to the child's racial, ethnic or national origin, to their allegedly Islamic faith, or to criminalisation of the child and references to the fact that they somehow deserve the abuse they receive and that, if they do not want this abuse, they should be punished. If they do not want this mistreatment, the solution is to go to their own country or, failing that, to another Autonomous Community or to another European country. The repetition over time, with different groups of children and in different centres, makes it possible to conclude that it is not a question of specific episodes of violence (which would be worrying enough in itself) but of a structural problem in which prevention and supervision systems and mechanisms for reporting and reparation fail.

Safety and aggressions to children

According to the children's narratives, the security guards are most of the times the perpetrators of such aggressions, even if educators and police can also be responsible (Fundación Raíces, 2020). Usually security guards intervene with violence upon request of educational staff to resolve issues that should be dealt with exclusively by properly trained educators. Fundación Raíces (2020) underlines that, as far as they know, there has never been any evidence of a real



internal investigation by the protection services, the testimony of the assaulted children or of other children who have been witnesses has never been collected, nor has there ever been, for example, a psychological evaluation of the possible moral damage suffered or of the credibility of the testimony of the children. Children perceive lack of protection and security in the centres and residences, and as a consequence they prefer to live on the streets.

Socio-pedagogical intervention model

The Spanish protection system aims at protecting, enhancing autonomy and emancipating the youngsters, nevertheless this general and ambitious objective is converted in different territorial models, given the responsibility of the Autonomous Communities in creating and implementing the regional protection systems. A question to be asked in all Autonomous Communities is to assess to what extent this protection system achieves the objectives it has set itself (protection, autonomy and emancipation of young people), on the understanding that if they are not satisfactorily met, the result will have a very negative impact on young people, probably irreversible.

Often, the identification and assessment of the needs of children in vulnerable situations is inadequate. Not enough account is taken of the fact that they are people who have often lived through repeated situations of fear and stress that have forced them to develop dissociative mechanisms in order to survive (Unicef 2017). Ignorance of their specific needs may lead them to be considered as disruptive children, and approaches that question the effectiveness of devoting time and effort to them may arise. In a special way, these assessments occur with children who reside in centres, opting for coercive measures of expulsion from residential facilities in situations of conflict or difficulty (Ibid.).

In Andalusia, the federation Andalucía Acoge (cit. in Fundación Raíces, 2020) highlights that since 2012 the quality of the intervention has diminished since big centres, with a larger number of places, began to grow to the detriment of the smaller centres, many of which were closed. Fundación Raíces (2020) underlines that the presence of security guards in big centres, especially First Reception Centres, together with the poor-quality management by the administration of the staff working in them, lead to violations of children's rights. The presence of personnel from private security companies is a clear symptom of the criminalisation suffered by these children. In such macro centres, often overcrowded, it is practically impossible to carry out foster care following a family model or developing individualized educational paths. And this means that the relationship with children/adolescents and the management of conflicts typical of any



adolescent is framed in a repressive way and is solved with forceful measures instead of educational actions.

In the Autonomous Community of Aragón, the Guide of recommendations for professionals (Gimeno Monterde, n.d.) underlines the limits and difficulties that arise from the protection model and its implementation in Aragón. In the programmes that support young adult in their transition to adulthood after they reach the age of 18, the following difficulties are named:

- Some facilities were overcrowded.
- The recruitment of professionals with no previous experience in the field of protection of migrant minors, lack of training needs.
- Difficulties in recruiting intercultural mediators, who can work in different fields (health, employment, education, housing).
- Deficiencies are detected in available mental health resources.
- In some cases, a risk of ghettoisation is detected in some educational resources.
- Lack of bond with the community outside the residential facility.
- The information provided to minors is scarce, and so are the mechanisms to be heard in the decision-making process affecting them.

Moreover, great concern is expressed towards the young adults that do not have access to such programmes, they are defined as “an emerging profile in this migratory cycle”, and whose profile is increasing.

Concerning the authorisation of residence, coordination of agents and relations with embassies and ministries, the following obstacle is quoted, among others:

- Bureaucratic processes that don't depend on the Aragonese service for childhood and adolescence result in some unaccompanied minors reaching the age of majority without documentation and without access to regularisation in the host country.

The guide (ibid.), according to national and international studies, underlines that the main difficulty faced by these young people when they reach 18 is to access the labour market. As well as language learning and emotional difficulties, in addition to problems of loneliness, which together make them vulnerable young people¹⁰.

¹⁰ An instrument in Spanish for professionals working with boys migrating alone is “Solos Aluahdania. Guía para espacios de acogida y trabajo en masculinidades con niños y adolescentes migrantes solos”,



Externalization of protection services

The great majority of residential services are managed by third sector organizations. When a minor is subject to protection measures, he or she has the right to be assigned a professional who will accompany him or her throughout the procedure. Nevertheless, these professionals are entrusted with the care and monitoring of many more boys and girls than they can cope with in order to perform their function properly. In addition to this overload, in many cases working conditions are deficient, with contracts below the real category (with the corresponding reduction in salary), lack of continuous training in the teams, absence of supervision and care programmes for the professionals, etc. This generates a high turnover in the teams due to demotivation and the impossibility of providing individualised and comprehensive care (Andalucía Acoge, 2019).

Residential centres

There are many differences from the regional point of view and also from centre to centre. Even if the residential facilities are open spaces since the minors are not there against their will and there are not judicial measures that imply a restriction of personal freedom, there is some secrecy around their way of functioning and access. In 2017, for example, the Directorate General for Family and Childhood of the Community of Madrid, "after a month and a half of dragging its feet and changing dates", has refused to allow socialist councillors and MPs to visit the Isabel Clara Eugenia shelter, where children under the guardianship of the Community of Madrid who have denounced "aggressions" are being cared for¹¹.

The heterogeneity among centres lead to great differences in the quantity and quality of the services provided in each of them: the working staff can be well trained or lacking basic training to work with minors, the activities organized in the facilities can be well oriented toward minors

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https://www.homesigualitaris.cat/files/ugd/c887cb_fc6171b76ef24fca9044e8fc51cb1886.pdf.

¹¹ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20170123/413631374731/psoe-acusa-a-la-comunidad-de-impedirle-visitar-un-centro-de-menores-de-hortaleza-donde-han-denunciado-agresiones.html>

needs and interests or can be just time-filling, the possibility or not of processing the residence permit in a relative short time, among many other aspects. In this way, different standards of protection and recognition of rights depending on the facility create very differentiated lives for children and adolescents. Concerning working staff, cultural mediation professionals are lacking in many facilities, this leads to miscommunication. Even without being cultural mediation professionals, very few workers have knowledge of Arabic or French (Unicef, 2019).

In some cases, centres are overcrowded, preventing the proper development of any kind of procedure and individualised care: some centres exceed the reception capacity by more than 100% or more. This problem has worsened in recent years with the increase in arrivals of unaccompanied children (Unicef, 2019). According to the Ombudsman, in 2020 the protection system continues without solving the underlying problems especially in Madrid, Ceuta and Melilla, such as the overcrowding of the centres, the lack of basic and necessary internal mechanisms to prevent and detect situations of all types of violence against children, particularly that which may come from the workers of the centres themselves, both public and private staff, and without having effective and accessible complaint and denunciation mechanisms for children¹².

In 2021, considering all minors under the protection of the State, both of foreign and local origin, they were in 1,345 protection centres with 20,057 places in the 17 Autonomous Communities. Although the average number of places per centre is 15, there is a large difference between territories. Five Autonomous Communities exceed the national average number of places per centre. The average number of places in the 247 centres for migrant children without family references in Spain is 24; these centres are therefore considerably larger than those available for the rest of the children in the protection system. Although small-scale protection homes are still the preferred typology (98 centres, 40% of the total), 15% of the centres have between 17 and 30 places and 18% have more than 30 places (37 and 44 centres respectively)¹³.

¹² Informe Anual Defensor del Pueblo 2019. Accesible here: <https://www.defensordelpueblo.es/informe-anual/54-informe-anual-2019/>

¹³Data from: "Plan de acción contra la explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes del sistema de protección a la infancia" https://www.mdsocialesa2030.gob.es/eu/derechos-sociales/infancia-y-adolescencia/PDF/Conferencia_Sectorial/Plan_de_Accion_contra_ESI_sistema_de_proteccion.pdf, p. 12-13.

Violences in the Spanish protection system

According to the report by Fundación Raíces (2020, p. 20), organization working for children in vulnerable situations for more than 20 years, children under the Protection System suffer different expressions of institutional violence, together with the lack of prevention, intervention and reparation mechanisms of the different administrations with consequences of enormous gravity for the children themselves. Some children and adolescents can suffer from “supervening poverty, social exclusion, criminalization, exploitation and abuse [...] due to the situation of neglect and institutional abandonment to which they are forced, [that lead them to] self-harming behavior and the risk of suicide” (ibid.). These situations can be considered as a response of helplessness based on sufferings and subordination that, in some cases, lead to violent and reactive response of the children directly proportional to the threat they feel.

Between October 2016 and June 2020, Fundación Raíces, in the framework of its activities of defense and legal assistance and social support and accompaniment of children, adolescents and young people whose rights are violated by the Public Administrations, has detected a high number of children and young people who [...] report having suffered some kind of abuse, mainly physical and psychological, and other degrading treatment in the centres, residences and foster homes where they lived, while they were under the care and/or guardianship of the Autonomous Community of Madrid. This mistreatment has been exercised mainly by the workers of these facilities, whether publicly or privately managed, mainly security guards but also some educators, and also by agents of the State Security Forces and Corps in their interventions in these facilities (Fundación Raíces 2020, p. 22).

Since 2016, 349 children, adolescents and young people have reported to the Foundation that they had their rights violated by a Public Administration, while they were under the guardianship or tutelage of a public protection of the Community of Madrid (ibid. p.30). 83.6% on the minors were of Moroccan origin, the other countries of origin were Spain, Argelia, Guinea, Cameroon and Gambia (Ibid. p. 48).

The factors of vulnerability that we mentioned in this report, if not properly and quickly solved, can become factors of violence that profoundly affect the lives of the foreign minors/youngsters.

Turning 18 as vulnerable factor

When adolescents migrating alone turn 18, they are no longer under the protection of the State, nevertheless the Organic Law of Juridical Protection of Minors¹⁴ obliges Public Administration bodies to offer preparation programmes “for independent living to young people who have been under protection measures, whenever they need it. (...) The programmes must provide socio-educational follow-up, accommodation, social and labour insertion, psychological support and financial aid”.

Considering both foreign and Spanish youngsters that were protected by the State, some 4,000 young people leave residential centres each year because they have come of age. More than 10,000 young people left the centres in 2018 for "other reasons" and their pathways are unknown (Fundación Cepaim, 2020). There are some 1,400 places in emancipation and autonomy facilities throughout Spain run by the country's largest federation (FEPA, Federación de Entidades con Proyectos y Pisos Asistidos – Federation of organizations running assisted projects and housing), but only 53% of young people find a place. Namely, 10% of young people end up on the streets after leaving a residential centre. Concerning the ones who succeed in entering an emancipation programme, more than 70% are men. Among women, 14% of them have children to care of. Some 66% of these young people is male of foreign origin, mainly Moroccan, who migrate without adult referents (Ibid.).

Turning 18 can be considered a vulnerable turning point: it is not only a matter of residential exclusion, but, more in general, the fact that the emancipation process for them starts 10 years earlier than other youngsters that live in a family. According to the study developed by Fundación Cepaim (2020) other areas of vulnerability are:

- Health: These youngsters have in general good physical health, but mental and psychological health is not sufficiently covered among this young population. Complex life trajectories require more individualised care. Those who are not in programmes find themselves in exclusion or extreme vulnerability. Addiction treatment and information, as well as sexual and reproductive health education are scarce. Difficulties in accessing

¹⁴ <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-1996-1069>.



non-covered services (dental, ophthalmological, certain medicines...) (Fundación Cepaim 2020).

- Work: Youth unemployment in Spain is largely structural and the second highest in Europe: more than 40% of young people are unemployed. The pandemic aggravates the situation, especially among young people formerly under the guardianship of the State. Job insecurity, lack of expectations and less training for employment make the employability of this group even more difficult. The Law on Immigration and the slowness of residence and work permits violate equality of access to employment on the basis of origin. In the case of women, precariousness, stigma and gender barriers make it even more difficult for them to enter the labour market (Ibid.).
- Training: these youngsters show lower educational level than their peers, they find obstacles to access to formal education, especially higher education. This lack of training hinders their integration into the labour market. Non-formal education is the most widely used and more public investment is needed. The administrative irregularity when leaving the centre for minors, together with the economic precariousness, prevent the continuity of the training itinerary. Young women emphasise the value of having received training and claim, to a greater extent than men, to be able to continue their studies (Ibid.).
- Social /familiar relations and network: In the residential centres little work is done on this dimension, there is hardly any prevention, but the role of professional teams is highly valued by young people. They have to face a certain sense of mistrust towards society and at the same time they suffer from social stigmas, including islamophobia and racism, little work is done under a gender and intercultural perspective (Ibid.).

Another interesting conclusion of the study by Fundación Cepaim (2020) is that the gender perspective in the intervention with youngsters migrating alone is scarce. Intervention models offer standardised resources that are not adapted to any kind of diversity. More training in gender perspective is needed. Intervention with young men are not framed taking into account the social construction of masculinities under an intercultural approach. Girls do not clearly identify themselves with feminist movements, nevertheless, they express their need for individual safety, based on self-esteem and self-knowledge, and also for external security, "to walk the streets without fear of aggression". The media contribute to the systematic invisibilization of these girls.

Unaccompanied migrant girls and sexual exploitation

We could not find accurate statistical data given the opacity of the phenomenon, but every year newspapers publish articles on sexual exploitation of unaccompanied migrant girls /girls under the protection of the State. Here some examples:

January 2022

A criminal group allegedly dedicated to the sexual exploitation of minors was arrested in Madrid. Ten minors were prostituted and used for the sale of drugs, according to a press release issued by the Madrid Police Headquarters. Several of them were also under the guardianship of the Community of Madrid in centres in the region. (https://www.eldiario.es/politica/proxenetas-captaban-menores-madrid-instagram-retencion-cadenas-invisibles_1_8670698.html)

October 2021

In Mallorca (Balearic Islands) the head of Institute responsible for minors protected by the Public Administration (IMAS) acknowledged that he was aware that up to 16 young people - 15 girls and one boy - under IMAS protection measures had been victims of sexual exploitation. https://www.eldiario.es/politica/prostitucion-menores-mallorca-anos-pugnas-politicas-lacra-no-limita-baleares_1_8380812.html

In May 2022, the Ministry of social rights and agenda 2030 and the one of Equality signed an Action Plan against the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents of the childhood protection system: “Plan de acción contra la explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes del sistema de protección a la infancia”¹⁵. Concerning minors in the protection system, the Action Plan underlines that “The exploitation networks make use of the protection and foster care situation of children and adolescents is twofold. On the one hand, girls and boys are often recruited in protection institutions to be sexually exploited. On the other hand, on other occasions, time spent in protection centres and in the exploitation network are combined, so that exploiters end up using the protection system as a residential resource for child and adolescent victims”. Acknowledging the economic and psychological vulnerability of the minors within the protection system, the text underlines that gender, “in the case of girls and

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https://www.mdsocialesa2030.gob.es/eu/derechos-sociales/infancia-y-adolescencia/PDF/Conferencia_Sectorial/Plan_de_Accion_contra_ESI_sistema_de_proteccion.pdf

adolescents, increases their lack of protection and vulnerability due to the deficient gender perspective in interventions and the design of interventions that are still focused on an initial neutrality that ignores the different structural dimensions of discrimination faced by girls and boys in childhood and adulthood”. Among different measures, including training for professionals working with minors, an action guide for cases detected and socio-occupational insertion programmes, the plan aims at ensuring proper reception, based on the best interests of the child, of unaccompanied migrant children on the coast, which allows for the detection of those girls and adolescents vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, as well as their correct and prompt referral. The Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 supports the development of a pilot project for the design of this protocol, which will begin shortly on the Andalusian and Canary Islands coasts.

COVID 19 and unaccompanied children and youth

Children and adolescents from immigrant families, asylum seekers, or without adult references, are some of the subgroups with the greatest social vulnerability and, therefore, have an increased risk of suffering from mental disorders, even more so in the current post-pandemic context. In addition to uprootedness, there are refugee children who carry with them very traumatic experiences derived from situations of persecution and conflict, and unaccompanied migrant children with very difficult histories and circumstances in countries of origin, transit and destination (Unicef 2021). The vulnerability these children experienced before the pandemic has been exacerbating when it happened. Basic needs that were fulfilled in a difficult way before, have been in a sort of suspension, such as education, safety, leisure, access to health service, relationship to other youngsters not belonging to this group. Even in cases where the child or adolescent is enrolled in the education system, he/she has encountered learning barriers during confinement, as he/she does not have the same access or resources to guarantee a correct learning process as other children have.

The staff of the residential centres pointed out the temporary impossibility and the lack of resources they have had during confinement and de-escalation to attend to the educational demands of migrant children and adolescents (Fuentes Lara, 2021, p. 142). In the case of Aragón, the interviewed professionals pointed out that the youngsters could cope decently with the quarantine, despite the fact that all administrative procedures were blocked and those who were studying lost their internships.

The Department of Justice of the region of Aragón published a report (Esteban, 2020) that points out that youngsters in residential centres could respect the lockdown in the majority of the cases, the consequences of isolation and confinement in the centres has meant the temporary loss of their socialisation spheres, as they stopped attending not only their training centres, but also the organized activities. Their relationships with their peer groups were limited and visits outside the centres were paralysed. To a large extent, their therapeutic and training processes were suspended. This, together with the uncertainty that comes with not being able to understand these radical changes in their lives, and the fear of contagion. The first two weeks were very difficult for the children, as it was hard for them to adapt to the new situation of confinement, with no free time outside and no physical contact with the outside world. We do not have at our disposal specific data on unaccompanied foreign minors, nevertheless, according to experts in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology, 1 in 4 children who have suffered COVID-19 isolation have depressive and/or anxiety symptoms (ANPIR 2020). In the case of unaccompanied foreign minors, Esteban (2020) underlines that in Aragón some young people experienced increased anxiety and concern of about the status of their documentation since they have ceased to be minors during their confinement when they turn 18, and this generalised standstill has translated into increased nervousness and concern about the immediate future.

Within the framework of COVID-19, studies point to a significant increase in the use of screens, video games and social networks among both children and adolescents, as well as young adults (Balluerka, 2020). Nevertheless, the lack of technological means has been highlighted in some residential centres, both in terms of providing children and adolescents with material for their educational process and in terms of providing the means for family contact (Esteban 2020).



“Ten years old men” or the pressure to provide.

Migrant boys: voices between two shores of a same sea

In order to approach the relationship between masculinity, gender relations, violence and Moroccan minor migration we have followed a double strategy, this is, to research by asking Moroccan youngsters and community workers both in Morocco and in South Spain. By doing this, we acknowledge the interdependence between both countries (as other international actors), as well as the need of mutual deep understanding on a cultural level, since minor migrants get caught in a conflict between different definitions of masculinity and age that, as we have seen, has a legal impact. Punitive regulations and attitudes are far away from solving any issue derived from minors’ migration. We are rather trying to understand the effects of two different gender normativities and relations on the impulse to migrate and its consequences for what is understood as “child” or “teenager” in Western countries and as potential “provider man” in Morocco and many other African countries. There is a cultural gap that is required to understand in order to be able to communicate and intervene with sensitivity and respect, being able to dimensionalise different aspects of violence in their lives, taking in account the gender dimension.

On the one side, the Moroccan one, we have explored the perception of a group of young Moroccan men and women¹⁶ who live and grew up without family references in Tetouan, in North Morocco. This was possible because of the informal help of the Consejo Independiente de Protección de la infancia (CIPI), organisers of the *IV Coloquio internacional sobre Cooperación al Desarrollo en el Norte de Marruecos*, entitled “*Adolescentes Migrantes sin Referentes Familiares. Más allá de la mayoría de edad*”. We assisted to the meeting from the 6th to the 10th of June, 2022, in Tetouan. The focus group was formed by a mixed group of ten youngsters (6 girls and 4 boys, from 17 to 23 years old) without family references who live under the protection of social organizations in Tetouan. We also interviewed I.A., a Spanish community worker who had been living in Tetouan -as young white Spanish *living-by-her-own* woman- for one year working in educative programmes for children and youngsters without family

¹⁶ The words used in Spanish or English in order to express the age, as we will see, do not suit the Moroccan concept and embodiment of the age. This is why we are going to use different terms, such as: migrant minors, youngsters, adolescents, teenagers, boys, girls, underage, young men and women, etc. In the context of this text, all these terms will be used to talk about the same social group: men under 18 of age who develop a migration project on their own, although we will refer to those beyond 18 youngsters as well



references. She had also worked in a Residential Centre for Foreign Minors in Andalusia, so she had a double view from both sides. We also interviewed L.T., a local community worker who runs one of the local organizations that provide assistance and education of children and adolescents without family references.

On the other side, the Andalusian side, we interviewed three 18 years old boys who had been developing their migration projects during the COVID crisis and had arrived in Spain on their own, without any adult relatives or tutor. We are interested in the role of men in their local culture, on the meaning of success and failure for them, on their idea of heroicity, their motivations and expectations; also on how they make sense of the experience of migrating in the conditions they do. We also interviewed M.F., a social researcher who had been doing ethnography with unaccompanied migrants for two years, being quite close to a group of them during the COVID crisis. Finally, we interviewed R.C. a Social Educator who had been working with young migrants for the last two years, so he could have first-hand knowledge about the situation and needs from the professional point of view. He also has worked as a trainer for promoting gender equality with men and takes into account the construction of masculinity when analyzing and attending the young migrant boys.

Voices from the Moroccan side

Masculinity and gender relations from the point of view of Moroccan youngsters without family references

All we have been talking about, the idea of men and the position of men in relation to women, the violences men commit against women and children, is the core of the problem of children who migrate to Spain and Europe. (Male, 19, Tetouan)

In Moroccan Arab the expression *machi rojola* is used to draw a line on men's behavior, since it refers to a lack of manhood that expresses different masculinity expectations and stereotypes over/of Moroccan men. It might be improperly translated into English as something like "real men don't do that". It comes to question the authenticity of the embodiment of the expected role in a man. There are different reasons why a man can be called *machi rojola*, some are linked to inner homosocial rules of men and others to the traditional opposition to femininity that



organizes the patriarchal dichotomic cosmovision in Morocco (Bourdieu, 2006). What follows are the key points around masculinity and gender relations we could catch from the dialogue with these youngsters.

Loyalty

A man of honour is loyal. The first association of *machi rojola* tends to have to do with being loyal to another man, as a requirement for friendship. A man has to probe that can be trusted, he must be the *author* of his word and keep it along the time. Loyalty is an issue of acknowledgment of authority between men. It is a precondition for homosociality, which is a characteristic of the public space men occupy. That is, a real man is able to keep his word and therefore to be trusted.

Responsibility

The word *man* is highly associated with responsibility. Being a man is being responsible for the “important things”. A man is defined by the accountability for undertaking the provider role as a breadwinner in the family, but also for the public roles and common affairs (from local to national). However, women’s responsibilities -linked to maternity, caring and domestic work- are acknowledged as such when asked, but still the important and visible responsibilities are the ones that men carry out and that have a public-visible dimension.

Therefore, a man is defined by responsibility as much as responsibility is defined by men. Responsibility defines and is defined by gender roles, so the perception of it is constructed under the binary opposition that divides spheres, tasks, spaces and bodies. The word “man” is highly connected to responsibility, but responsibility is itself seen from a Moroccan hegemonic masculine view that invisibilizes women’s responsibilities in sustaining daily life. The importance of a responsibility is defined according to what is understood as “men’s responsibilities” to the point, as we will see further on, that if a boy or a woman -girls are not mentioned in this case- is assuming these “masculine responsibilities”, they are also seen as “*the man of the family*”, or at least, as masculine as men are seen.



Protection against threats and dangers

The family, especially women, has to be protected. Men have to play a “*police*” role, which means that men have to be able to solve problems and conflicts that could mean a threat for the survival of the family. But also, protecting women of the family (wife, sister) is mentioned. There is a double face of the protecting role of men at the level of the family. On the one hand, men are expected to materially be able to sustain and protect the family members integrity and its unity, but on the other hand, at the same time they have to protect the official customs and morality by controlling the family members, especially women¹⁷, for whom other men might be a sexual threat and provoke women’s stigmatization and rejection of the family (blaming and punishing the victim)¹⁸.

Space and mobility

This dynamic of double threat (of family’s survival and of sexual and gender order surveillance) responds again to the division of spheres that organizes what bodies can or not occupy what spaces. Men can and must move as much as women can’t and don’t. In this sense, the perspective of traveling for migration is more a transgression for women of any age than for an adolescent boy.

In our culture a man has always to go to search [...] We also have an image of girls that cannot go out on the street, they couldn’t even go to schools before, they have many frontiers. For example, they cannot go to another city, not even to another country, to study or to work. (Male, 23)

The gendered division of labour requires a parallel social division of spaces that defines the norms of mobility, freedoms and restrictions for women and men. In some cities of Morocco

¹⁷ For a greater reflection over the link between the idea of protection, threat, women’s public participation and hijab, see Grosfoguel, Ramón (2020) *Feminismos islámicos*. Ed. Bellaterra.

¹⁸ In any case, as in many other countries, most of the sexual offenders are men of the family of the victim: *A report by the Coalition Against Child Sexual Abuse (COCASSE) has found that the majority of victims are between the ages of 5 and 14 and that many of the reported cases of abuse were against males (69 percent). The report presented a total of 360 sexual assaults on children between 2010 and 2015 and found that the perpetrators are often family members. Sexual assaults against minors are also committed by relatives, neighbors, strangers, and teachers (Morocco World News, 2015), in Arianna Braga (10/09/2022).*



this is slightly starting to change, but in the countryside most of the girls cannot go to school or they just go from home to the school and return.

As a consequence, men have to stay away from the housekeeping and caring roles. In the urban areas as Tetouan men can help women with these tasks, but the domestic and care-work carried out by women at home *“is not the image of man”*.

“Being a man” and age

*There is always a man that protects the household and the family,
never mind if he is 10 years old
(Male, 23)*

When the group is asked about what happens in a family when the father is absent, they associate this possible absence to death, war or migration: *“no matter you are 10 years old, if you work to sustain the family and you have a protecting role in the family, you are a man”* (Female, 23). There are also children-men, those who go to school and play, but who also work for the family’s sustainability.

Being a man in Morocco *“does not depend on how old you are, but on what you do”*. A 10, 11, 12, 13 years old boy can be already perceived from adultist expectations, this means that from a Moroccan perspective there can be 10 years old adult men (Ghannami and Jiménez, 2019). Age, as gender, has to do with the roles people perform more than with a biological determination as European science had defended from the last three centuries -with terrible consequences- until the last decades.

“Being a man” and gender

In other words: the biological age doesn’t exclude a boy from being a man as long as he plays adult men roles, but also women can become *men* when there is not any man in the family. *“The mother of the house becomes the man of the house. A man is not a very strong thing with a beard. Manliness is having a responsibility even if you are a woman”* (Female, 21). As we can see, both intersections, age and gender, count much less than the kind of responsibility a boy or



a woman (or a “proper man”) take on. Masculinity is a position in relation to social roles more than to gender expression or sexuation¹⁹.

The pressure to provide

In our culture a man has always to go to search
(Male, 23)

All these assumptions around masculinity work on a cultural level to produce the subjectivity of transnational migrant minors. When asking about the way *machi rojola* is used over men, after the use to point out a feeling of betrayal between men, not being actively working and helpful for the family was the next association. There is a clear mandate of “working for the family” that focuses on the provider-public-visible role for men and on the carer-domestic-invisible one for women.

The economic survival of most Moroccan families strongly depends on the family as a system of production, as it used to be for most of the people in Europe until the transformation into a system of industrial production-consumption, process that completely changed the social construction of age, since the actual socioeconomic system started to require more complex qualifications and time for training. We cannot think how the Moroccan ideal of masculinity works for young migrants from the lineal European parameters of age, inherited from the 20th century, as childhood - adolescence - youth - adulthood - eldership. That is how we come to understand, from a Moroccan perspective, that “*there are 10 years old men*”: in a survival, unequal and hyperconnected context, age engages with masculinity to accelerate the embodiment of the provider role.

¹⁹ There is a huge literature of Anthropology of Gender that shows many different ways of constructing gender identities. The case of the Balkan “Sworn Virgins” is a clarifying example of how a culture is able to replace a man -a provider head of the family. One of the remaining women of the family would swear to keep celibacy -making impossible to get pregnant- and occupy the masculine position, this is, she would adopt the masculine provider role, starting to work with the rest of the men out of the household. But not only the roles, other practices such as going to the masculinized bar of the town and adopting a typical masculine self-expression (short hair, trousers, hat, etc) comes then to be expected, normative. We don’t say this is the same pattern in Morocco, we rather take it as an example of how a culture can construct gender identity based on social roles, regardless of the biological conditions. In a very different degree than “sworn virgins”, this is what we get from the discussion in the group, where the biological difference doesn’t play any special role in the discourse of the group (Martín Casares, Aurelia, 2006).



A real man must have a disposition to *“sacrifice for the family”*, but out of the family. As examples of men's sacrifice for the family out of the family they mention going to war (*protecting* the families that compose the nation) and to emigrate (*providing* basic material conditions to the family). We will come back to this idea of sacrifice further on, since it implies a spiritual dimension that makes the experience of migrating -with all the dangers and violences the travel represents- something worthy to try.

If men have to always *go and search*, migrating also masculinizes and adultizes Moroccan young boys. On the other hand, women have to *stay and wait*, which clashes with young Moroccan women's desire to live an autonomous life and develop their own life projects. Nevertheless, there is also space for the complaint against the provider role amongst men. Some of the boys expressed discomfort about the *“having to work to sustain the family”* mandate, but instead of questioning men's lack of resistance to the mandate or the forces that push men to sacrifice to become providers, they reproach women for their passiveness and unconcern about the future, since -boys say- Moroccan women would just have to wait and get married with a man that sacrifices for her wellbeing. However, when they are asked if women work at home they acknowledge that *“women work all day at home”*, in the same way that they acknowledge that staying at home *“is not the image of a man”*.

Men who commit gender-based violence

The group tries to understand why there are men who use violence against women. In doing so, they include the violence against children. In the answers we have to take into account the reproduction and identification between men and the social effects of social hierarchies between men in the public and visible world.

a) Reproduction and identification:

- Men commit violence against women because they received violence when they were children.
- By unconscious imitation-normalization while identifying with other men from childhood; that would explain as well sexual violence.



- Normalization of daily normalized hierarchical relationships in a context where men have to mark the bounds of their power over others by establishing positions of helpfulness and even servility with those underneath in the hierarchy.

b) As an effect of daily hierarchical relationships:

- Violence against women and children men carry out in the family context is seen as a consequence of the pressures and discomforts men receive from other men in daily public life.
- Men need to prove superiority over women and children to demonstrate their status as men.
- Women and children represent a chance for men who are in low positions in the public life hierarchies between men to get *power over* non-equal-others in the context of the family and the household.
- The group points out that it is not that much about physical violence as about daily psychological violence. At a subtle daily level, men's violence is normalized.

Again, their explanations have to do with cultural and social reproduction -which implies power relations reproduction- and not with fatalistic biological determinations that would essentialize patriarchal violence.

Men's reaction to women's opinions and demands of change

During the discussion of the group, we could grasp some reactionary discourses and attitudes from the boys towards the girls that give us some information about a change of expectations of women and about the gender tensions this is provoking in the Moroccan young urban masculinities:

- a) Masculinist victimization and women blaming



As we have seen before, men blame women for the hard duty they have to face as provider men. Although they can acknowledge that women work all day at home, they spontaneously draw a stereotypical negative image on women's role in regard to providing for the household. Women would just have to stay safe and protected at home and wouldn't have to worry about the future. Men would have the important risky task of foreseen and solving the future, while women would only have to wait for the incomes in order to manage the present of the family's needs.

That is presented by men as a privilege that men cannot have. It expresses a discomfort on the mandate of providing and becoming a head of the household, but that discomfort does not lead to a critical reflection on masculinity, on the forces that pushes them towards that role or on the privileges men enjoy by having this role in relation to women.

In response, women complain about the over-representation (or caricature) men show on them: men don't acknowledge women's own projects and dreams. They deny women's agency and ability for autonomy. These young Moroccan women question men's concept of "safety" for women.

b) Fear from being displaced by women

When there is a woman's voice in the group that says -away from any biological or essentialist conception of masculinity or femininity- that women can perfectly be "the man of the house", as far as they assume masculine responsibilities when a man is absent, there is a voice of offense and reaction from some men: "*A man can never be replaced in the family because a man is a man, a man is important*". As we can see, the argument is based on a tautology, since men's patriarchal power is sustained on the performative effects of men's self-referentiality in order to impose as a dominant group (the important, protagonist, active, visible, and so forth). The defensive argument also excludes any biological or essentialist reason why men are that important in the family, acknowledging that the kinds of responsibility and role have a higher importance in defining who is who.

Men try to preserve the monopoly of masculinity, so women who accede to masculine positions and roles are seen as a threat. As negative example of "bad woman" the boys talk about widows who migrate to rich Arab countries to work -they suggest- in the sex industry and wives able to abandon their husbands and go with another man when the husband is unemployed. When they are asked about who tends to abandon the family more, men or women, they all confirm that



men do, except one negationist voice that equalizes women and men in family abandonment by saying “both”²⁰.

c) Undermining women's opinions

During the discussion, young women expressed their opinions, sometimes uncomfortable for men, but they were more often interrupted by men who, sometimes, would diminish their opinions in order to disavow them by saying words like: “*she doesn’t know what she wants*” when translating her (since any of the women could speak Spanish). In any case, women didn’t feed any conflict when men were getting defensive, avoiding to clash or to make it personal.

A need of affective-sexual education

Eventually, the group had a debate on the social issue of single motherhood²¹. In Morocco, single mothers are stigmatized (“*they are seen as sluts*”), while men are invisible in this conflict (“*they say nothing about men who do that*”). Families reject them and they have to live on the street with their children. Many of them come to increase the number of children without family references living on the streets²².

²⁰ Children abandonment and the phenomenon of single mothers and men who ignore responsibility are an important issue in Morocco. Being a single mother is being outcasted. Single mothers are socially seen as “sluts”, might be accused of working in prostitution, are excluded from the official labor market and punished by the family legislation (the Mudawana Family Code), since sex out of marriage is forbidden. Also children get unprotected, which eventually drives to increase the number of children without family references living on the streets. See Pena, Lúa (01/12/2021). A measure to make DNA tests to ensure the fatherhood of the babies was proposed some years ago by the Family Minister (Basima Hakoui, a woman), finding strong resistance. See Cuesta, Irma (10/06/2018).

²¹ The term “single mother” is currently being questioned by feminist from the Global North as far as, on the one hand, it takes for granted that women have to be defined in regard with heterosexual marital status. Historically, a woman without a man tends to be seen as “alone, single”, but 2, 3, 4 or any group of women are also read as “alone” if they are not with a man in the public space, just like in the family context. On the other hand, many married women are already single mothers to the extent men don’t participate in the rearing and the domestic work. The term “autonomous mother” start to take strength in feminist circles. We will still respect the term that has been used during the groups and interviews - single mother-, but taking a critical distance about it.

²² *There are 50000 children born per year, 123 per day. From this 123, 24 are daily abandoned, according to a report made by INSAF, a Moroccan organization that stands for children and single mothers rights.* Hortigüela, Rebeca (09/11/2018) El país donde ser madre soltera es un calvario está más cerca de lo que



There is a complaint in the group about the lack of sex-affective education, since they are “*not talked about anything before 18*”, the only they get are idealistic representations of love. They demand preventive educational measures for early non-wished pregnancy, but also to be prepared to face sexual-affective life in general, which represents a certain taboo in Morocco.

Minors, migration and North Moroccan society: situation of and differences between boys and girls

What follows is an overview from the fieldwork on the situation of children and youngsters without family references in Northern Morocco. We present the main ideas from two interviewees, the first being L.T. She is a local pioneer in associative work for assisting the children increasingly present on the streets of Tetouan.

Moroccan community worker in Tetouan

Father's absence

The father's absence and abandonment plays a core role in the phenomenon of lonely children, despite “*normally fathers don't want to emigrate, they want to get ahead with their families since Moroccan family's ties are very strong*”, states L.T.. As a proof of the strength of the family she adds: “*Even really poor people prefer to have children with their families rather than giving them to an orphanage*”. This is interpreted by L.T. as a sign of the will to shape a family of Moroccans as a whole, but there is a subtle blame of the poor in the sentence -especially poor Moroccan women- that responds to a traditional religious context where abortion is not even a choice, shaping a family is normative and hierarchies are naturalized. Nonetheless, as in many other countries of the world, father's abandonment is very common and an increasing public



issue in Morocco. We found it difficult to focus on men who abandon, because the conversation rapidly shifts towards the situation of single mothers and their children.

At the same time, L.T. attributes the rejection of single mothers to cultural conservatism: *“Moroccan is a quite conservative culture that tends to reject people in this situation”*. She admits that there is a blaming of single mothers (and of people who need assistance in general). *“They are seen as irresponsible people who don’t want to solutionate their problems”*.

In cases where the father dies or is absent there is usually another relative to support the family: the mother, the grandmother, the aunt, the uncle. L.T. explains that *“family support is crucial and rejection is fatal for these children”*, since otherwise they will not receive the required institutional support.

As we see, the problem of children living on the streets in Tetouan is connected²³, on one hand, to the single mothers' social rejection that leads these women and their children to poverty and exclusion and, on the other hand, with the social permissivity towards men’s lack of responsibility. All the focus is on women, who suffer with their children the social stigmatization and their consequences. Men’s responsibility, as we saw in the focus group, remains out of focus.

Portrait of the children’s sexual offender

L.T. explains that about 80-90% of the minors without family references suffer sexual abuse, however she doesn’t manage concrete data and doesn’t trust official media information. *“I’m based on what I hear and see”*. Asked about the profile of male abusers, she states that she doesn't know to what extent tourist men abuse children and teenagers, but she confirms that local men do. Abuse comes normally from some male relative or neighbour -especially in situations of high poverty-, who sustains with some money the household and takes advantage. *“The man is sick”*, expresses L.T., *“I don’t know any case of a woman committing this abuse”*. She states that when a man is discovered by authorities is quickly imprisoned.

In this view, men’s sexual aggressions are seen as a product of a pathology that is supposedly punished every time it is detected, but there is not any other scientific approach around the

²³ Other minors living on the street are inner Moroccan migrants on the way to try to cross the border.

problem beyond punitive measures nor any problematization of men's sexual education nor of the construction of masculinity on sexuality.

Sex, violence and silence

According to L.T., talking about sexuality is a taboo in Northern Morocco. During the sessions with the children (from 8 to 15 years old), L.T. organizes an "active listening group", which is a space for free expression with a group. L.T. works with the boys while another educator works with the girls separately. Sometimes sexuality is slightly talked about and a shy complain about sexual discomfort with close man has risen. The educators try to make them develop tools to identify and avoid these situations, as well as to develop a sense of consent.

Sex abuse revealing is not any usual, L.T. clarifies, but when it happened it was surprising for the educators, not for the children of the group. They found it normal. Nevertheless, the most important aspect is that they are unable to express it. Sexual abuse is very difficult for them to talk about as far as sexuality is given the weight of religious norms in society. It is silenced because sex out of marriage is forbidden by Islam, so victims feel blamed and guilty. We will come back to this question further on.

Boys and girls expectations towards future

Boys seem to have embraced the breadwinner expectations. L.T. explains that they want to earn money fast and soon, they want to get married, have children and shape a family despite most of them getting a low qualification. In urban contexts, men get married when they are about 27-



28, while current urban women who aspire to a job tend to do so when they are 23-24²⁴, confirming that “*many women want to work before getting married*”²⁵.

L.T. clarifies that young men want a woman with a job as well, otherwise they wouldn't be able to sustain the household and to attempt a good life (having a car, going out in their free time, traveling, etc). So, as it had happened on the other side of the shore a few decades ago, two salaries are needed to sustain a household, which suits women's aspiration to develop a profession and participate in public life and seems to provoke men's renegotiation of the expectations over women and femininity dominant ideal and, therefore, over men and masculinity dominant ideal as exclusive provider.

This is starting to displace the traditional composition of the family and the gender roles expectations (Dialmy, Abdessamad 2016). But it also happens that there are girls waiting for a man -the richer the best- to marry her and also that many of them abandon work and profession to accomplish a full-time domestic role once they get married.

Social change and tradition

In L.T.'s view, even though Moroccan people accepts some changes in their culture, they also want to preserve their identity. “*Culture is very strong in order to keep traditions*”. We can deduce a strong double morality in regard to what Islam and the State sanction as sin or illegal. People talk about forbidden issues in private, but people avoid criticizing the official vision. Therefore, we can detect a tension between tradition and modernity that implies the transformation of women's aspirations and men's positions in relation to women (most of all in relation to the role of women and to the increased need of two salaries in order to sustain a family). Most of the youngsters in urban areas -as we could see in our interviews- don't think as traditional men and women do. In Morocco only few authors are paying attention to this

²⁴ However, underage girls' marriage is practiced in different communities in the countryside and the mountains and the judges tend to allow it “and re-establish the norm” (using one article of the Mudawana that allows judges to make exceptions to the prohibition that have been established during last family code reforms). This is due to the difficulty to find a balance between the Moroccan traditional cultures and communities -where early marriage works, as something naturalised, for a higher system of survival- and their current situation in relation to adapt to the international laws and recommendations. See Otazu, Javier (22/03/2019). Legal age for marriage is 18 in Morocco, thus, it is common for women to get married younger than 23-24 years old.

²⁵ Notice that heterosexuality and marriage as a *normative destiny* are implicitly structuring the future prospects.



transformation in gender relations and in masculinity. As a reference, the sociologist Abdessamad Dialmy (2016) is talking about “transitional Arab masculinity” to grasp this current moment of tension and change in Moroccan masculinity.

Spanish community worker in Morocco

The second interviewee is I.C., who offers a view based on her experience working in Residential Centres for unaccompanied foreign minors in Andalusia and her experience for about one year working with youngsters and children without family references in Tetouan.

No place for youth

I.C. points out that *“boys have a very short childhood, they have to adopt adult men’s roles pretty soon as far as they have to work with and for the family or to get a job to contribute”*. That happens, as we have seen, from the age of 10 onwards. *“There is a strong socialization on this”*, I.C. states. Both community workers point out that *psychological violence* represents a huge social pressure for youngsters, as well as one of the main strategies in order to socialize boys in the breadwinner roles. Men’s role is the main role and boys are forced to achieve it: *“head of the family and of public life, despite, in the end, women completely run daily family life”*.

Therefore, *“there’s not any proper social space for youngsters to interact as equals”*, and cultural pressure works in order to turn youngsters into functional to the Moroccan ideal of society and family as soon as possible.

Cultural reasons to migrate for youngsters

As we have already seen, fulfilling the provider role for the family, possible from the age of 10, plays a main role in understanding Moroccan minor boys migration (and not only). Boys receive a huge pressure from the family when there is a migrating project supported by the unit, while girls are rather stigmatized and *“never say they want to go to Spain to send money to their family”*.



Until now, we are showing a narrative that gives an image of the underage Moroccan migrants as transnational providers exclusively moved by the determination to accomplish the role for the wellbeing of the family. This is the core material reason why many families boost any of their male members to migrate or why one of them takes the decision by himself. But the cultural reasons are quite powerful too. “*For many youngsters, more than economic reasons, the main reason to emigrate is to get higher rates of freedom to do and choose*”. This is another expression of the Moroccan inter-generational crossroad: youngsters aspire to higher rates of individual freedom and civil rights, but they find a strong pressure and restrictions from the trinity Family/Religious/State in order to follow the traditions.

Nonetheless, again, Moroccan boys and girls don’t migrate in the same quantity nor quality. Boys embody a double standard, that we could name *liberty-safety patriarchal strategy from a subaltern masculinity* position in the global map. This kind of “not only provider” kind of youngsters’ migration seems to have a greater presence in urban youth compared to rural. They wish to live their adolescence-youth in Europe as a promise of freedom, abundance and accumulation of capital and of “impossible experiences” in their homeland. But, at the same time, they want to return with success (measured with money and experience accumulation) and get married with a traditional Moroccan woman. Many of them see migrating as a season of life before returning home.

Many male urban Moroccan youngsters aspire to both lives: Liberal Democracies liberty for youth and Muslim traditional local family for adulthood and old age. The first represents the promise of adventures and experiences based on the colonial-hegemonic ideal of freedom, as is to say, the promise of “youth” itself as long as they can delay assuming strong provider responsibilities and they can have time for leisure with other youngsters in proper youth spaces and practices. The second represents the promise of safety under the Muslim patriarchal family, where he would occupy a privileged position and enjoy feminized caring work. These young boys are seduced by the hegemonic *consumist playboy masculinity* (single, casual, promiscuous, adolescent and young) -which requires to delay their adultist fate defined by the *Moroccan Muslim breadwinner masculinity*²⁶. In Morocco, they could even gain status as men if they succeed in their migration project in Europe (this is, accumulation of different kinds of capital: money, experience, educational and social). Succeeding means getting closer to the hegemonic masculinity, gaining prestige, authority, power of attraction, etc, to the eyes of women, but also of other men in the homosocial hierarchy.

²⁶ For an analysis of the emergence of the playboy masculinity as a reaction to the breadwinner’ in Liberal Democracies see Preciado (2013).



However, Moroccan girls tend to prefer staying in their destination country once they emigrate, since returning implies facing the stigma and it would represent a loss in terms of freedom, rights, independence, and individual aspirations. *“Many arrive in Spain in terrible conditions and with the family ties completely broken, since her migration is seen as a betrayal or shame for the family”*.

Both boys and girls expect to achieve a good standard of life, *“they both want to receive professional training and to get a job”*, they want access *“to a normal and worthy life”*. However, young women aspire to embody a change in the female model compared to the former generations. *“They want to be able to take decisions over a job, about when to become a mother, when to get married, whether to put on the hijab or not, they don’t want to reproduce their mother’s model”*, much more exclusively based on motherhood and family caring. Meanwhile, as we see, urban boys tend to will a free youth time life, but also to get married with a Muslim woman as symbol of the “good woman” to build a Muslim family with. Therefore, as far as young men are projecting a desire on Moroccan women based on an obsolete model for many young girls, there is a growing tension around gender roles changes that might lead to a renegotiation of gender relations.

Effects of COVID-19 lockdown: drugs and mental health

Some unaccompanied boys engaged in a migration project toward Spain got caught in the cities of North Morocco during the COVID-19 pandemic. It became impossible to develop a migrating project for them. *“They had to adapt and survive”*, which, according to our interviewees, produced some negative consequences.

First of all, *drug consumption* (which is not only a youngster problem) seemed to increase. The drugs they take are hash and *kifi*²⁷ most of all, but also other cheaper drugs are coming in such as glue, pills, anxiolytics, etc. Pills are mixed quite often.

Also *mental health problems* have risen. As well as in many other contexts, emotional expression of vulnerability or weakness is not usually welcome in the Moroccan context. *“It is very difficult to know in detail about what a youngster is going through because feeling psychologically bad or sick is a taboo”*. Saying “I don’t feel well” is not welcome; crying or expressing suffering feelings is not permitted. *“They have to always thank Allah for being alive, having a new day of life”*. So, expressing intimate suffering is like acknowledging Allah does not support you. And you

²⁷ Kifi is a “soft drug” made with the rest of the marihuana leaves once they have been grinded for producing hash.



got what Allah wanted you to get²⁸.

So, for the community workers we have interviewed, leading people to express psychological suffering in a group is very difficult, “*but at the face to face level it becomes clear they need to be listened to and to talk about their problems. Not advised, just listened*”, finally clarifies I.C. For instance, it is difficult to know to what extent boys who migrate have suffered sexual abuse since they never get to talk deeply about it, there is silence, taboo.

The stereotypes on European woman and on Muslim Moroccan woman: the double standard of young men over women

From the point of view of the Spanish community worker, the boys she works with “*commit daily unconscious male violence*”. This is something she notices on the perception of women the boys have, making a clear differentiation between European and Muslim women, who are seen and expected to stand for different standards of femininity. How women are conceived in terms of race, ethnicity and nationality makes a difference. Many practices that are admitted as *normal* for European women are stigmatized for Moroccan ones (*slut*²⁹). So, in the end, European women represent a promise of sexual (and gender) freedom also for them, but such a freedom is perceived as a threat in Moroccan women. They desire to interact with European women, but

²⁸ Meanwhile, in the Global North there is a “therapeutic boom”. Western societies have built a strong industry around psychological suffering and it is becoming quite common -not still a shame- to ask for psychological help. However, the hegemonic message in Liberal Democracies is not less cruel than in Moroccan Islam. Liberal Democracies have assumed an individualistic and false self-sufficient ideal of subjectivity in which how good or bad things are going in life depends on “You”. The individual is over-responsibilized of structural dynamics and of the effects of political decisions. Unemployment is a good example, especially if we talk about breadwinners or providers. Unemployment rates might be really high, maybe many jobs have been destroyed after a company's decision or a political reform, the proportion of people competing for a job might be unbalanced in regard to the quantity of jobs, etc., but eventually the weight of the consequences falls on the individual. The psychological pressure that leads Westerner people to individual therapy and medicalization has to do with meritocratic classist ideals and individualization. The message for the believer is: “you got what you deserve in proportion to your effort or your decision taking, so if you succeed or fail is because of you; you can get whatever you want if you really wish it and work hard for it, so if you didn't get it because you didn't endeavour enough”. See Illouz (2010). Meanwhile, the Islamic pressure silences people by turning the intimate suffering into a sign of lack of Allah's support, since being thanked to Allah just by being alive is compulsory. The message for the believer is: “you cannot be ungrateful with the creation of Allah, which is your own self. Whether Allah does not support you is because you deserve it, because Allah wanted it like that. If Allah rejects you, the community will reject you. You have to show you are not rejected by Allah and conform with your life as it comes”.

²⁹ In this sense, *slut* works the same disciplinary way as in Northern Christian countries as far as it represents a patriarchal dispositive to differentiate between the “good” and the “bad” women. The difference is about the cultural codes that are sanctioned and the intensity of the pressure.



they don't want them as a reference for Moroccan ones.

Slut would be a Muslim-Moroccan woman who performs self-expression and adopts traditional masculine practices such as smoking in public. In a way, European women are seen as *free women* who don't make strong commitments since “*they travel and have relations with different men*”. As we have just seen in relation to migrating expectations on the boys, each femininity reflects a different masculine model, projection and expectation: *Playboys* and European free woman (*sluts*, “bad woman”, good for fun) vs *Breadwinners* and Muslim Moroccan women (*mothers*, “good woman”, good for family).

Moreover, in Northern Morocco European women are seen as *sluts* because there is sexual tourism demand not only by European men, also by women in their 50-60s. This reveals that patriarchy fears and sanctions women because of their sexual freedom (and freedom in general), because of playing an active sexual role (active roles in general), to the point of becoming prostitution client, one of the most typically masculine positions in patriarchy.

Boys on the streets and prostitution

These European sexual tourist women are seen by boys and young men as both a possibility for having casual sex -which is a transgression of the official morality, which forbids sex out of marriage- and a possible passport to Europe. In part this is a reality, but also a stereotype of European women for many people in Morocco. Sex and seduction with European women - something seen as impossible and not desirable for Muslim women- might be a possible way to access to Europe. At the same time, I.C. states, European women manage a colonial orientalist stereotype over Arabs masculinities, by which “*Arab men are to be more sexually burning*” (more than European white Christian men, which represents the colonial hegemonical reference of masculinity).

Anyway the greater demand of prostitution of underage boys come from white male tourists from the Global North. I.C. clarifies that this is not seen as “homosexual tourism” as far as in Morocco “being homosexual” as a social identity, besides being stigmatized and criminalized, is culturally ruled by the norm of active-passive in body penetration, by which the one who actively penetrates remains in the dominant-masculine-heterosexual position, while the one who receives the penetration occupies the dominated-feminine-homosexual one. To a certain point, homosexuality is considered a much higher transgression of the morality and the law in comparison to men to boy sex as far as heterosexuality is much more protected than children's rights (Braga, 2022).

This is a clear sign of the lack of protection and vulnerability of Moroccan minors living on the



street. However, our informants tell us that they also develop strategies to pressure the tourists by using homosexuality criminalization as a tool to blackmail them and get more money since homosexuality is illegal and could involve prison penalty, beyond the consequences in the country of origin for the tourist. In the end, from the point of view of the Moroccan authorities, breaking the rule of homosexuality is more threatening and deserve a greater punishment than white richer men searching underage boys and girls for having sex for a cheap price.

Voices from the Spanish side: the situation and needs of Moroccan boys in Southern Spain

Young boys who migrated during COVID as minors

As we have seen, when underage migrants in Spain become 18 years old they start to receive a different institutional treatment. The following analysis is based on three interviews with 18 year old boys who crossed the border as underage during the COVID-19 crisis and who are currently living in a Residential Centre runned by a hird-sector organization. Two of the boys, A.M. and M.M, are Moroccan, while the third one, A.G, comes from Guinea Conakry. That gave us a comparative perspective which allows us to assess similarities and differences of young men migration in the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea.

Machi Rojola

As we saw thanks to the focus group, the expression *machi rojola* contains the main meanings about what a man is supposed to do or be. These are the topics these youngsters touch when they are asked about:

- When a friend fails you and does not comply with: “*he doesn't keep his word*”.
- When a man doesn't work.
- When a man doesn't treat a woman right.
- If a man does not accept a challenge from another man (self-defence).



As we see, their definition encloses the masculinity ideals of homosocial loyalty and the provider-protector responsibilities. When they were asked whether a man could be told *machi rojola* when doing domestic work or children caring, despite the fact that this would also feminize a man, they would not identify that transgression with the expression *machi rojola*. By doing that, a man could be told “you are a woman”, because *machi rojola* questions the quality of the masculinity of a man, but not a man as *man*, as caring and domestic work would imply. By the use of *machi rojola* people seem to supervise the quality of a man, to what extent a man embodies or not the ideal of “honourable man”, but a man firmly engaged in feminized reproductive work would be questioned as a man itself.

For the Guinean young, the possibility of becoming a real man in his homeland is highly linked to the possibility of studying, getting professional training, finally a job and getting married. According to him, they are considered men with 14 years of age, but in that context, men usually don’t get the resources to get married until they are about 18, while women get married starting from 14, 15 or 16 years of age. “*There, you are already a man with 14, here you are still living with your parents when you are 18*” (A.G.).

They all were already working for the family since their childhood. “*I have been working in agriculture since I was 3*” (A.M.), “*My family didn't have the choice for me to study, so I was selling things with my mother, but I started a mechanic training when I was 13*” (A.G.).

Family: the mother’s support

The three interviewees have a father, a mother, brothers and sisters. Moroccan boys got family support despite having taken the decision themselves. They say to have come to work “*for the family and for myself*”. They get on well with them and have almost daily communication. The bond with the mother is highly important for them, while the father doesn't appear much in their discourses. These transnational minor migrants seem to occupy the traditional husband’s provider role as far as they want to be a provider not just for the family, but especially for the mother. As we will see further on, some don’t even say they want to send money to the family, but to the mother. When one of them is asked whether he imagines himself living in the next future with a couple, he expresses he is not interested in that, he just wants to get a job and a flat and help his family because, he affirms, “*I am only in love with my mother*”:

“*Since I decided to come here, who helps you? None, only my mother. Who misses you? None, only my mother. Your mother is the only one who is there, anyone else*” (A.M).

The Guinean boy, however, hid from his family the decision he had taken with 14 years old. He wanted to flee from poverty and war, “*they were killing people*”. He gave the news once he had



reached a different country. The father got angry when he found out, but his mother supported and advised him: *“you are already a man, you have to struggle, you have to get a life”*.

Again, mothers assume the emotional and mental workload that keeping in touch and taking care in the distance requires, while men are completely out of focus on this caring work. We can understand this as an aspect of the feminized global caring chains that support migration projects all over the world and that contributes to the feminization of poverty and precarity, but also to the support of families on large distances (Pérez, 2009).

The trip

Moroccan boys didn't find a special difficulty in traveling during the COVID-19 crisis, even though they didn't travel during the greater restrictive season of the pandemic. *“Nothing special, just a mask and rucksack”* (A.M.).

However, *“it is easier for Moroccans, but the ones who come from Southern Africa have to reach this point”* (A.G.). It took about 3 years to reach Spain for the Guinean boy, he left with 14 and arrived with 17. He exposes many of the dangers he has been going through during that time:

- Hunger.
- Long distance walk.
- Short time imprisonment (as a form of police's punishment).
- Imprisonment at the arrival in Europe (*“here they put you in jail as well, because if you are enclosed in a room alone, that's a prison”*).
- Border police violence (*“Crossing the Moroccan side of the border, where the police bring big dogs and bite you”*).
- Death witnessing (*“in the ‘patera’³⁰ I witnessed a mate die, I think because of the fear”*).

In contrast, one of the Moroccan boys affirmed to have a pleasant journey in the 'patera': *“A very good trip, without any problem, we arrived well, no one died, there was food and water”* (A.M). However, the possibility and normalization of the surrounding deaths because of the travel conditions seems to be assumed for all of them as something possible. We will see how,

³⁰ Originally, a 'patera' is an open and flat floor boat used for fishing in not-deep water. It is commonly known as the very precarious boat with which most of the migrants attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea.



despite this assumption, it is still worthy to try at the subjectivity level, beyond the material forces that lead them to flee for survival from poverty, war, etc.

Living on the street

The three of them have been living on the street during the process of migrating. Living on the street is one of the worst aspects they identify about migration. Every time help/assistance during the trip is mentioned, it has to do with a woman:

- *“There are women in Ceuta that help you... One woman there always helps you”.*
(M.M)
[...]
- Did you meet migrating women?
- *“Yes, I met a woman who helped me in Morocco, while I was wandering around. I arrive to Rabat and remained working in there. This woman had a flat and helped me to find the job. I stayed there for about 10 months”.* (A.G)

M.M. lived for 5 months on the streets of Ceuta. Living on the streets means being exposed to aggressions and violence especially in the form of robbery, but *“there is nothing you can do about it”*. This nothingness reveals their vulnerability as far as they don't receive the institutional support they need and they are seen as statusless persons without rights nor voice.

Success and failure

Success has the double masculine facets we have been talking about. In these interviews both migrating for the family and for oneself are explicit. The provider role for the family is much more remarked by the Moroccan boys than by the Guinean one. Notice the different kind of support they find in the families and, concretely, the mothers: while in Moroccan families it supposes a survival strategy for all their members and Moroccan mothers keep a strong daily bond, the Guinean boy migrates for his own wellbeing and the Guinean mother pushes his son to struggle to get an own life and become a man. They all have in common to take the decision by themselves, the difference is the family's position and expectations over the son's decision and the weight of the family (breadwinner) or oneself (individuality) as the main reason to migrate.

For the Moroccan boys succeeding in the short-middle term has to do with getting clothes, a driving license, a job, a flat... *“But first, the family”* (A.M). One of them imagines himself in 3



years *“living in Spain, but going back to Morocco for a visit”* (M.M). They don’t express any interest in love relationships. When they imagine themselves living in a flat, they don’t think of any partner cohabitation projection, instead, they see themselves living alone or with other male friends: *“I don’t think of a couple. I think about working, having a flat, calmness and being on my own, helping my family. I am only in love with my mother”* (A.M). They acknowledge that while Moroccan men get married between 25 to 40 years of age, many Moroccan women don’t want to get married so young as they normally do (*“19-20 years of age”*). Anyway they *“don’t think of that yet”*. Their notion of *“being a man”* has to do with the provider role and the achievement of economical self-sustainability, but *“not yet”* with the formation of an own family. They expect to live a biographical time of youth on their own -as it is constructed in the Global North- while they comply with their providers-son’s moral duties.

When they are asked what they *would like* to work in, they respond by talking about what they *could* work in, quite pragmatic and stuck on their social class reality in Spain. They apply for different training in order to develop professions such as hairdresser, baker or cook assistant.

During our research in Morocco we had been told about the shame on those who return without succeeding, as a counterpart of the plus of status men get in their homeland when succeeding (or, at least, seem to have succeeded). There are even young Moroccan men that would like to return home, but they don't do it because of the pressure they will receive.

However, the Guinean boy is the one who takes more time to talk about this. Returning to the homeland without a job or money that ensures him greater status means the blaming of the community. Not succeeding is seen as a personal and individual fault. *“It is like a shame to return having nothing”*. They are accused of being lazy, of having migrated just for fun and of *“being living by the help of the people, because they think everybody here has a lot of money, a house, and so on”*. A.G. explains that one of the reasons for this attitude of the community would be the way young migrants use social media, in which they project an idealistic image of themselves as successful consumers (pics next to a Porsche, Nike shoes, video-clip trap singers’ jewelry, etc). They project an image of success based on consumption, which is interpreted as if the aim of these underage and young migrants was to get access to the capitalist paradise of distinctive consumerism. But for this Guinean boy *“to succeed is not getting a lot of money or a house”*, although he wouldn't explained what succeeding is for him.

Migrating as mission of transcendence



Moroccan youngsters are massive followers of Morad: a Spanish trap music star who comes from a first-generation Moroccan migrant family background. Morad talks about issues that worry and appeal to them. *“I knew Morad before coming here. Everybody knows Morad in Morocco”* (M.M). They like him because *“Morad makes himself plain [...] He talks about things that happened to me when I was trying to get by in Ceuta”* (M.M). When we asked them about their favourite songs, *“Lograr”* (To achieve) was one of them. The boy repeated the lyrics of *Sufrimos para lograr*. *“What is it talking about?”*, *“Success and suffering”*.

It is remarkable the sense of sacrifice linked to the enterprise of migrating alone. The sacrifice of the separation from your family and beloved ones, the sacrifice of doing a dangerous trip in which you lose your rights and have to reconfigure your identity, the sacrifice of running the risk of not being welcome again in your homeland, the sacrifice of facing many different kind of daily violences because you are seen vulnerable and defenceless as citizen or even human, the sacrifice of having to hide from the police or the sacrifice of losing your autonomy once you achieve the goal of crossing the border.

How is it possible not to give up and quit? For Moroccan youngsters, supporting the family is a transcendental mission, since the family plays a transcendent role as much as religion. As we will see further on, religion is an important source of spiritual strength in order to face and keep ahead with the migrating project.

When we asked A.G. about what leads a person to keep on with the trip, their answer establishes a relation between being able to deal with very difficult situations and assuming God’s or Allah’s decisions (fate, luck):

- *What makes a person keep ahead?*
- *Having a good heart, because if there is a mate that dies next to you, many people cannot bear the situation.*
- *Have you experienced such situations?*
- *I did in Morocco, because a mate died in the ‘patera’ I was in.*
- *Dehydrated?*
- *I’m not sure if it’s the fear. Some die of that... You don’t know whether you are going to die or to get saved. That depends on God, because if none comes to save you, everyone is going to die, the boat is inflatable, just rubber, if it gets pricked and sinks, it’s over. We were lucky, a maritime rescue came over.*

As in a Christian purgatory, where souls are waiting for God's decision to be saved or not, the ‘patera’ becomes a life or death moment. Luck is decided by God, the only thing a human can



do is having a “*good heart*”, which means, being hard and strong enough to withstand the fear, the horror and the sorrow.

Heroicity and masculinity

Wherever the Moroccan boys seem to be on a mission as providers for the survival or wellbeing of the family, the Guinean boy -who is more focused on a personal life project- doesn't see his journey as a heroicity, “*it doesn't make you a hero, it makes you a man*”. Nonetheless, he would not advise anybody to do it. When we asked about women doing the trip as well, he just talked -as we have seen earlier- about a woman who hosted him and took care of him for a time, but women migrants seemed to be invisible to him. Finally, he comments: “*most of the people were men*”.

The arrival to the Spanish Residential Centre

When we asked about the best and the worst aspects when they arrived, some mentioned as the best part the treatment of the educators and volunteers who attended them, who were a source of acknowledgement and affection at that moment. But they agree in talking about the Reception Centres as the worst aspect for different reasons:

a) Loss of autonomy

By passing under the guardianship of Spanish institutions as “minors”, they lose the autonomy and the sense of adulthood they acquired very soon, as we have seen. This is a shocking process, but it became even more restrictive because of the COVID-19 prevention measures. These youngsters get completely polarized from being unprotected and abandoned on the streets to being enclosed into a centre based on discipline and restrictions.

b) Guards and educators aggressions

They cite as a good reference the centre of Las Palmas (Canary Islands), but they talk about aggressions in the centre of Ceuta. “*It is difficult to explain*” (M.M). One of the boys accuses educators and policemen of committing aggressions against them. “*They used to hit you*” (M.M). He also declares having been beaten by secret police and formal policemen when he was living



on the streets of Ceuta. *“I’ve been beaten 3 or 4 times... One in the Residential Centre and twice at the port of Ceuta [...] You try to get underneath a lorry and the police come over ‘What are you doing! Pah! Pah!’ and they beat you”.*

c) *Drug abuse, mental health and lack of care*

Many of the boys who arrive after a long period living on the streets or after a trip with a high exposure to many different kinds of violence (psychological, physical, sexual, racist, sexist, xenophobic, economical, etc) develop some type of drug addiction and/or mental disorder. *“There are boys that start the trip with one mentality, but the trip changes them”.* By the experiences of migrating many of them lose the focus and goals that made them take the decision. *“There are people who get addicted to drugs on the way and then, when they arrive here, they are locked up and that’s a source of problems”.*

As we can see, Reception Centres are the scenario where many of the consequences of violence in youngsters who migrate without family references are concentrated. Drug addictions and mental health problems triggered by the violence they have been exposed to, the loss of autonomy for being hosted from a disciplinary logic instead of a caring-humanitarian one, and the centre’s staff aggressions are situations that overlap and build a systematic violation of children rights and a sort of spiral. *“I’ve passed through many centres [...] It is not an occasional fact, it is the whole dynamic”* (A.G).

Cultural discrimination, prejudices and European women

When asked about possible shocking aspects they perceive in relation to women and gender relations, one of them says: *“Some of the girls are racist. They tell you ‘moro’, thief”* (A.M). At this point the boy explains that whether there is any Moroccan who steals is because he has nothing to eat. *“If I have nothing to eat I will steal too”.*

There is a certain “minor migrant pride” or self-affirmation in this statement, in the sense of rejecting the rules of a society that is violent against them and does not really care nor meets the needs and expectations they have. There is the feeling that society doesn't even want to understand the link between vulnerability, poverty and certain crimes. In any case, European women A.M. refers to are reflecting the general classist-racist prejudice that turns poverty into



an essentialist racial and ethnic issue, turning invisible the violence that implies poverty as directly connected to social class. In the end, migrant youngsters are exposed to multiple discriminations and aggressions as an effect of the *intersectional symbolic violence*: aporophobia - racism - islamophobia - ageism.

There is also a mention of the public space occupation and the mobility of women in Europe (“Moroccan women don’t go to the street that much” [M.M]) and about visibility of homosexuality. This is what the Guinean boy says about it:

- *I didn’t have the custom of a woman being with another woman, or a man with another man. But nothing happens about it, everyone makes their own life and that’s it.*
- *Is it illegal in your country?*
- *I hadn’t seen that before. I didn’t know about it when I was a child, I didn’t know this was possible. I think it’s illegal because 95% are Muslim and 5% Christian³¹.*
- *Do you think Christians are different in this sense than Muslims?*
- *Yes, but now my mind is a bit more open, since I have experienced so many things in my journey, now I don’t even pay attention. But the first day I saw it I really felt I was in a different world.*

When migrant youngsters start to get in touch with the local hosting culture they see themselves in the double position of clashing against their gender and sexual prejudices -brought from their context of departure- and dealing with daily intersectional prejudices (sexist, racist, classist, Islamophobic) that local people project against them. Such processes reveal the importance of applying an intercultural and intersectional sensitivity in social intervention with minor migrants without family references, just as the need of sensitization for both migrants and locals.

Situation and needs of minor migrants boys in Andalusia

³¹ In Guinea Conakry homosexuality is silenced, hidden and criminalized with prison, or even with death penalty if the sexual act is “committed against a person under 18 of age”. Van der Sanden, Hermine (2019). <https://boletinderechoshumanos.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/situacion3b3n-colectivo-lgtbi-en-guinea-conakry-2019.pdf>

This section is based on an interview with M.A, a researcher who carried out an ethnography with young migrants without family references, some of them girls, in the Andalusian context. She also collaborated with a community support group for young migrants who were living on the street, sleeping in cars or in small overcrowded flats. We also include the experience of R.C., a social educator that worked tutoring Residence Centres for young migrants and participated in a community support group in order to help minor migrants during the hardest time of the pandemic. He also worked in gender education programmes with Andalusian teenagers and is trained to catch how masculinity and ‘machismo’ work in boys and men.

Violence normalization, power abuse and dehumanization

Migrant youngsters without family references are socialized in hierarchical power relations that are reinforced once they leave. They bring their own rucksack of vertical hierarchy normalization, but *“the earlier they are institutionalized, the worse”* (M.A.), (some from 11 years old), since the centres they are enclosed reinforce their socialization in hierarchical power relations.

Nonetheless, this ritualization of inequality in human relations is learnt both on the streets and in the minors centres. In both cases these boys learn strong vertical hierarchies and boys who go from the street to the centres just find continuity. This is because of the highly institutionalized centres (especially in Ceuta and Melilla) that work in a sort of prison regime, despite being conceived as protective. In the centres, so as on the streets, they learn to blackmail in order to get whatever they need and to humiliate in order to mark their position in the hierarchy. *“They learn they have to step on or to be stepped on. It’s the law of the strongest”* (M.A).

Centres are overmassified and runned by private companies that apply behaviorist disciplinary methodologies and get profit with overmassification, as we already pointed out. *“The boys call them concentration camps, cows farms, etc”* (M.A.). During the COVID19 lockdown there was a certain continuity between the centres and the outside as far as the minors were already locked down into centres. But the lockdown became especially hard for youngsters who were on the street: *“they hadn’t any social or medical care assistance, enclosed in abandoned houses,*



*sleeping in cars, etc. They were even locked up in a bullring in Melilla with the rest of homeless and asylum seekers of the city*³².

Thus, there is a parallel process of dehumanization along the migrating process that has continuity once the boys get into the institutions. *“First they live the institutional dehumanization, then the social one”*, since also on the street they experience racism, xenophobia and islamophobia, they are persecuted and beaten by the police and suffer daily discrimination from the people.

Consequences: drug abuse and mental health

As we have seen, drug addiction appears during the migrating process as an escapist way to face the rough reality they have to go through. The youngsters consume most of all hash and anxiolytics, *“they take them for evasion, and they tell you explicitly”*. Not always, but drug addiction tends to feed back with mental health problems.

One of the main reasons for psychological suffering has to do with the shock they experience when they find out the huge distance between the ideals they bring about Europe and the reality they clash against. This is some of the mental health problems and stressors detected by the researcher:

- Suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts.
- Frustration (too many barriers to accessing a job, clashing with the employment overabundance stereotype they bring about Europe).
- Double pressure: from “there” (families and communities success expectations) and from “here” (rejection, encloement, exclusion, etc).
- Self-image deterioration, social image as “poor”, “excluded”, “assisted”, etc.
- The shock between the idealistic vision of Europe, in which poverty and scarcity have no place, and the reality in which they get involved once they reach Europe.

³² Varo, Laura (20/07/2020).



Cultural shock and group identity

Understanding the formation and change of these youngsters' identity requires taking into account that they have a double early socialization, a double language. One is the infantile and boyish time in their homeland's local culture, the other is the consumerist mediatic culture that seduces them and they want to perform. *"They are westernized boys with African starting culture schemes, which produces a space for the shock"*.

For instance, *the notion of age* makes a difference, as we have seen from the beginning, since *"they don't live a period of youth in the European sense, as a time for playing, flirting, exploring and so on. They are not children in the European sense and don't perceive themselves as children or teenagers [...] they feel humiliated to have to ask for anything as if they were children"* (M.A.).

They build a group identity and sense of belonging on these bases. They develop their own aesthetic markers such as the hair-cut, the clothes, the music they listen to, etc. Minor migrants without family references vindicate their condition of *heroes* as long as they are survivors. They stand for a sense of *class pride* as far as they feel humiliated, frustrated and angry. They belong to each other in the same way as society has rejected them. Eventually, *"they build an identity on the base of their social exclusion"* (M.A.), especially expressed through the music. For instance, they all manage the French acronym MDLR (*Mec de la rue*, or street boys). *"This word became very popular between them due to a song, named the same, of Morad. It currently has 24 million visits on YouTube"* (M.A.).

Anyway, in the centres and flats where they live, despite the conflicts they face between them, there are also strong bonds of solidarity that come from the awareness of their common situation.

Family and the polarity mother-father

Fathers tend not to appear when they talk about the family and, when they are cited, it is in negative terms: *"idles, lazies, that live from the work of the wife (the mother)"* (M.A). In a way, we can suppose that many of these loving songs try to substitute the lack of the father, as a successful provider, for the mother. The father's abandonment is a usual situation connected to the single mothers' issue, clearly associated, in turn, to the increase of poor children living on the street and dependent on the insufficient institutional help in Morocco.

While the father represents the absence or the failure of the provider, the mother is everything to them. Mothers receive a transcendent value and respect, they glorify them which, by the way, clashes against the islamophobic stereotype of Muslim mother as a submissive, exploited and



devoted women. *“Many migrate to send money to the mother, beyond the whole family or themselves”* (M.A).

Most of the Moroccan male youngsters come from this family polarization: fathers don't exist, mothers are everything to them. Their masculine reference of fatherhood tends to be based on absence.

Changes in the perception of women

As another example of the tension of belonging to a double context and culture, they bring with them the expectation of getting married young and having children, but at the same time they feel unlinked to the Muslim femininity models of women. As M.A. explains, *“some even say: I don't like women from there anymore”*. On this issue, the discourse of the youngsters without family references that haven't crossed the border differs from the ones who currently live in Spain. The Spanish community worker in Tetouan points out that those living in Morocco still long for the double strategy of living an European youth, but a Muslim family life for adulthood. As we see, on the one hand, some of the boys who cross start to take distance from the traditional Muslim femininity models, but at the same time this femininity model is increasingly changing as far as young Moroccan women show their own personal aspirations, goals to achieve and start to get greater rates of participation in public life. Albeit different surrounding conditions and pressures, this makes young women take distance from the traditional Moroccan masculine model as well. We also have to notice that there is an inner difference between Moroccan migrant youngsters: for urban boys, a higher degree of equitable gender roles is more normalized and equality principles are not that far from their mindset as for rural boys, who still might defend the traditional patriarchal idea in which women have to be at home and cannot work outside.

Moroccan girls also emigrate

Most Moroccan young women migrate to Spain already with an educational project or with a work proposal, sometimes with the help of other relatives who are already in Spain. In the Andalusian context there are no Moroccan girls living on the street once they cross the border. The reasons are that there are fewer in numbers, they are much more exposed and vulnerable to specific patriarchal violences such as trafficking networks for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and, because of this (quantity and protection) they access more easily to accommodation and resources. Young women make up about 10-15% of the Moroccan



youngsters' migration, so there are more efforts to protect and absorb that female population. However, some of them are recruited into prostitution networks.

One of the informants talks about girls that disappear from the Residential Centres:

“They stay for 1 month or 2 in the Centre and they suddenly start to appear with valuable objects such as iPhones, dresses or money, until they don’t come back. A guy with a luxury car comes to pick her up. If they are underage a search and capture order is issued” (R.C.).

On another level, Muslim girls are the ones who more often detect or talk about islamophobic experiences. They perceive the rejection of European women because of the use of the hijab. Some of them stop using it, fed up with daily social barriers. European tend to associate Muslim women with submission: *“they feel judged, especially by other women”*.

Thus, boys and girls are caught between the institutional and the social islamophobia. If young migrant boys are associated to criminality and indiscipline, young Muslim migrant girls are seen as submissive and alienated. The first ones find continuity between the punitive treatment they receive on the street and in the institutional resources and personnel, while the second ones are institutionally protected but socially treated with condescension and paternalism.

Sexual violence also in the other shore

As we already pointed out, in Tetouan most cases of sexual aggressions are committed in the family environment, but underage and youngsters living on the street are in prostitutional relationships with adult European tourist. At the same time, we have to take in account that we could not gather a first-hand testimony given the fact that, as it has been said, it is extremely difficult since sex out of marriage and Islam works as a taboo in order to silence the victims and the psychological suffering. But in the Spanish side there are boys that claim have been sexually abused in centres by officials of every range. According to our informant M.A., there are also boys on the streets that get raped in the context of prostitution, *“they agree relations without penetration that are not respected by clients: they get raped for 10€”*.

It is important to take in account that *“many boys started to emigrate when they were 15, 16 or 17 years old, they arrived without having any sexual experience and education and, once institutionalized, they don’t have the chance” (R.C)*. After staying in residential facilities without personal autonomy, once they are 18 years of age, they are “thrown away” to a very different culture with a great lack of information and maturity. The lack of sexual and gender education



make them even weaker when facing sexual situations and proposals when they get out of the institutional discipline.

These are some of the sexual expressions of the dehumanization these *mecs de la rue* are socialized in. Sexual violence is committed by men of different countries by taking advantage of the status of nothingness and, therefore, unprotection in which these youngsters migrate.

Failure and Success

“They don’t know about the legal aspects or the unemployment rate in Andalusia, for them this is a Manna³³”
(R.C.)

Again, as migrant youngsters showed in their interviews, the pressure minor migrants are exposed to is double. They know that returning with nothing is a humiliation. *“Many want to return home, but they don’t do it because of the perspective of being marked as a failure in front of the family and the community”* (M.A). To succeed means to increase the status as a man, while failing undervalues their masculinity.

There is another duplicity that organizes the dynamic migrant youngsters are caught in, that is, the polarity between the threat of shame and humiliation as product of the poverty, and the projections they make through social media, which is the projection of success: pics next to luxury cars, narcissist caring of the hair, the clothes, and so on. They aspire and pretend to live a stereotypical consumerist rich successful young man life, while they are actually treated like children and form part of the underclasses of the so-called rich countries.

At the same time, there is still a will of non giving up after all the sufferings they have been going through. After all, the young migrants need to give sense to all the violence they have received and still do starting from the journey until their arrival and permanence in Spain. This sacrifice must have a sense and deserve a prize for the ones who persevere.

³³ Manna is described in the Bible as the divine substance by which God fed the Israelites when crossing the desert for 40 years. It also appears in the Quran three times.



Spirituality and transcendence

According to the anthropologist vision of M.A, faith plays a fundamental role in being able to sustain the sacrifice and in giving sense to the dehumanization they experience. *“It’s all you have when you cannot trust in human beings any more”* (M.A.). Spirituality, channelled by religion, is a source of strength that lets them keep on with their migrant project despite all the violences. It is the inner strength for sustaining the sacrifice. *“When you have been that close to death, when you have seen friends dying, `having achieved it’ acquires a transcendental meaning and value [...] They risk their lives for a dream”*. Thus, as a consequence of the normalisation of violence from childhood, filtered by the spiritual faith, *“They manage a different scheme of value of human life”*, states M.A. We can now remember the title of the favorite Morad’s song of one of the interviewed Moroccan boys: *We suffer to succeed*. According to the Guinean boy, the need of a *“good heart”* is one of the keys for succeeding, which actually means being able to withstand the surrounding violence, that is, to suffer.

The idea of divine predestination is also present and lets them deal with the situation. In order to cope with the uncertainty of being in hands of forces they cannot control, in front of the fear and the danger, they embrace the attitude of *“trusting in God, in destiny”*. This is why it never minds if you succeed or fail, if you arrive alive or die on the way, *“it was written”* (M.A). Eventually, they get the vital strength from family, especially from the mothers but, most of all, from faith.

Hierarchy and emotional expression

It is not strange that young migrants reproduce or transfer the violence they experienced in their migration process amongst them. They tend to put high pressure on each other: isolation, hardness, vulnerability and weakness hiding. *“They show great contention and lack of expressivity”* (M.A). According to our informant, it took her a long time and many meetings to get confidence with them since they are used to hierarchical relationships. That is why, in her case, interviews used to turn into a *different space* then the one experienced in the street and in the residential centres in order to create a relatively horizontal relationship and be able to increase their expressivity, reaching a kind of *“therapeutic session climate”* as they started to express about the violence and suffering they experienced in the past and in the present time.

Eva Illouz (2007) establishes the origins of the therapeutic interview in the USA during the 1920s, when the psychologist Mayo took in account for the first time in technocratic psychology the personal emotions and situations of the interviewees, workers of an important company. Mayo established some rules that still today can define the therapeutic interview: 1) Pay whole attention to the interviewed person and make explicit you are doing so; 2) Listen, don’t talk; 3)

Never argue, never advice; 4) Listen to what the person wants to say, to what doesn't want to say, and to what cannot say without help; 5) While listening, draw the patterns of what you are listening to, but test it by resuming what you understood (without adding or confusing) and ask for confirmation; 6) All said is a confidence that cannot be said to anyone else (Illouz, 2007). Both the Spanish community worker and the researcher point out the importance of creating spaces for minors' free expression-distension of the pressure and the violence experienced, just by actively listening to them and avoiding advising attitudes.

Recommendations to improve an appropriate intervention with male minor migrants without family references from a gender and intersectional perspective

Along the research all the participants have detected needs in relation to different issues and problems that surround minors' migration. Next, we are going to compile them including the opinions of R.G, the social educator we could interview and that was already mentioned in the former section.

Keys for a gender-transformative and intersectional socio-educative intervention

a) On migrant youngsters needs

- Importance of establishing horizontal relationships, since they are used to get whatever they need from a power-over way to interact.
- Need of getting in touch and establishing bridges with the hosting society-community (in order to become actually "hosting").
- Acknowledgment of the youngsters being an example of overcoming and resilience.
- The need of going beyond assistance measures, which already covers basic needs such as hygiene, medical and dental attention, clothing, sport and autonomy promotion.
- The need for privacy for the youngsters.

b) On professional needs

- The need for systematicity, strategy, focus and protagonism of the issue.



- The need for intercultural sensitivity and knowledge, especially at the time to approach topics that might be taboo or difficult in their home culture, which implies taking in account the cultural codes of expression they manage.
- Intercultural sensitivity and knowledge in order to avoid or manage home-land xenophobic conflicts, such as those derived from mixing ethnics with a former hierarchy between them (for instance, the mix of Moroccan with Saharoui and Rifian) or the difference between the rural and urban origins.
- To differentiate between offering tools to devolve in daily life in their current context and to question or to try them to renounce their former culture.
- The need of qualified male trainers to work sexuality and gender with them, since they get especially inhibited if there are women in the situation.
- Support and train former lonely migrant children to work in the sector of unaccompanied minors' protection.

c) On institutional needs

- Implementation of services and facilities where the caring-educative perspective replace completely the disciplinary one.
- To break the silence around violence in some Residential Centres and to introduce supervision measures on them.
- Introducing a long-term educational strategy around topics such as sexuality, gender relations or relational tools. At the moment, very few are done, without any systematicity and with low quality.
- Training should be official and accredited, which means an incentive for migrant youngsters in order to attend them, especially when they are linked to applying for social integration residence permit or other benefits.



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