

'Typologies of exploitation experienced by unaccompanied minors in Italy and France - gap between expectations/hopes at origin and reality in Europe'

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From 2010 to 2014 I designed and coordinated a research¹ aimed at measuring the propensity to migration of youth from Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia and investigating the impact of migration on UAMs coming from the same countries living in Italy and France. A sample of 2484 has been interviewed at destination, and 131 in Italy and France.

The contents of this speech are mainly based on the findings of the research, corroborated by the results from other surveys or literature.

I had the opportunity to do this job because the presence of youth travelling alone, also known as Unaccompanied Minors (UAMS) or Unaccompanied Asylum-Seekers Minors (UASMs) have become a common pattern in today's global mixed migration flows. The presence of UAMS in Europe has been increasing since the beginning of year 2000 reaching, according to Eurostat statistics, an approximate rounded down amount of 30.000 cases in year 2016.

Although there is a considerable difference among the two characters, they are generally considered in the same way: they are pictured as passive players with no role in the decision-making process ruled by parents, relatives or peers, they are considered more as vulnerable victims rather than active actors of their life. Maybe this is much true for the UASM, but generally not for the UAMS. In any case, the tendency to keep the two together already speaks about the care with which the European Institutions address this topic.

Such supposed vulnerability offers policy makers good arguments to draw attention only on the dramatic and emergency features such as exploitation, abuse and trafficking suffered during the travel. Therefore, the impact of the migratory experience on these youngsters is mainly investigated in relation to the traumatic events suffered during the travel, while the living conditions once at destination are rarely considered as a source of discomfort.

Reality is quite different.

Regardless the reasons and motivations, when a person leaves the place of residence to move somewhere else, s/he travels with two metaphorical rucksacks: the first one is filled with ideas, projects, objectives and expectations. It positively balances the second one, packed with sadness, longing, worries and concerns.

The analysis of the data gathered in the three countries shows that in shaping the individual's attitude to leave, the drivers related to material achievements - work, money, outfits - prove to play a relatively slight influence. On the contrary, subjective and relational factors² turn to represent major levers in the decision to leave. The research, therefore, shows a more complex and nuanced portrait far from the simplistic image of the migrant (of any age) as a moneymaker machine.

From the research we got two different profiles of youth willing to move from their place of residence.

Profile 1

¹ The research "propension et expérience migratoire des mineurs marocains, tunisiens et égyptiens" was carried out in the framework of the SALEM and SALEMM projects, funded by the EU Commission. Further detailed information on research framework (hypothesis, objectives, methodology, sampling and statistical treatment) and outcomes are available at www.salemm.org in French and Italian.

² The subjective relate to life satisfaction, trust in own abilities, introjected values; the relational relate to the representations of the world, the attachment to the family and to the group of peers.

Aged 12-18, they are quite happy and satisfied with their family, their economic status and education.

They wish to migrate and feel that this is within their reach, not difficult and feasible in the future. Migration is not considered too positive but is seen as a way to achieve personal goals that cannot be made at home.

The first profile expresses a sense of hope for the future. The youngsters in this group are satisfied and happy, but neither in a juvenile nor naive way. They are aware that life is not easy, that it is full of difficulties both in the human perspective (relationships, conflicts, etc.) and with respect to the environment. But they face with courage and balance, appreciating what their country, offers them: the country itself is beautiful, but the responsibility to make it liveable is that of those who inhabit it.

This vision is perfectly in line with the expressed values, which refer to youth active, curious about the world (travel) and the future (environment), but without anxiety (leisure); they certainly want to achieve their objectives without losing too much time (speed), but they are aware of the importance of taking a step after another (possibility to make mistakes). But the most important aspect is related to values relating to themselves: tenacity, sense of responsibility and strength speak of people who know that in order to succeed it is necessary to be resilient and believe in their personal capacities.

In this sense, migration is clearly seen as an opportunity, and it is desired, but without judging it as something "very good" a priori. Young people who adhere to this profile have a rather critical picture of migration, but know that it is a rewarding experience to achieve ambitious goals.

Profile 2

Aged 15-18 they are not happy and satisfied with their family, economic situation and school, with a negative outlook towards life, generally considered difficult.

Migration is positive and the only opportunity to be happy, because people are happier abroad. But they are aware that is a difficult and risky experience, where it is possible to lose everything.

Unlike the first, this profile includes young people with an expression at a time stern, dark, tough.

From them emerges a sense of frustration caused by a state of dissatisfaction and unhappiness, of deep concern. Unlike their peers in the previous profile, they see the future as negative, without nuances. Life is difficult, but this difficulty does not appear to be material (lack of financial and intellectual resources), but structural (everything seems bad about their country).

They share many values with the previous profile (the speed, the force of will), but expressing a strong anxiety towards the self realisation: the desire for change (whatever it is), the will of being autonomous, the possibility to take risks, overall reveal a profound fragility. But are clearly absent the inner self referred positive values highlighted in the previous profile.

In this context, the propension towards migration is high simply because it is considered as the only option for social redemption, for raising their status, to be visible. But despite the "desperate" pressure (or perhaps precisely because of it) the migration is considered simultaneously as difficult, out of reach, both for the risks associated with it and for the lack of means, financial but also psychological, for undertaking it.

Today youth from those countries have developed a sense of global citizenship that often collides with the poor atmosphere - economic and social - of the place where they live. In this context, migration is considered at best as a legitimate means to achieve a "first class" social status (the first profile), while at worst it is the only possibility to "exist".

OBSTACLES ON THE ROAD OF FULL EMANCIPATION

After leaving their countries with such rucksacks full of aspirations and expectations, the majority of UAMs arrive at destination passing through traumatic experiences. Unfortunately what they find at destination is a reception and a care system that is fragmented, at best, or unable to intercept their real needs. The assistance provided rather randomly, due to lack of subject-specific expertise, turns into a source of further stress and trauma.

What is most striking is that upon arrival almost all minors endured experiences of street life, sleeping in the street, eating junk food, and living out of expedients until they were arrested by the police and placed in a community (not before having experienced detention). It's not awesome that in many cases they were exploited in petty crimes – begging, drug smuggling, robbery - and low paid jobs.

As a result, 40 % of the sample declared to be unsatisfied of their migratory experience due to the delusion suffered upon arrival, the sense of abandonment and solitude experienced at destination, the perceived sense of being marginalized and socially excluded.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the small size of the sample at destination, the investigation raises the concern that too many UAMs suffer additional traumatic experiences at destination linked to the fragmented and often inadequate assistance response.

The harsh suffering and the prolonged state of anxiety and depression provoked by the shocking gap between expectations and reality, risk to detach the young migrants from the possibility to develop a sense of belonging to the country(ies) of destination.

The main harm comes from the gap between their genuinely good self-consideration as persons and the devaluating group label attached to them at destination. By being labeled an individual is stripped down of his personality, a process that reduces him into a stereotype, and push into a process of self-marginalization, consolidating the feeling of being unwelcomed.

All the above considered, it doesn't surprise the number of 10 thousands UAMs currently vanished. Because the reception system as it is conceived is turning them in victims *de facto*, sentencing the majority of them to precariousness, vulnerability and disadvantage on the labor market, forcing them to accept, and bend over to, exploitative conditions. In this scenario making a list of the exploitative situation to which the UAMs are nowadays exposed it is even pointless.

It is clear and sounds even superfluous to state that there is a strong need that European migration policies pay greater attention on the impact of reception services on the youth's social inclusion process in order to fully ensure the best interest of the child principle, that today seems today to be rather worn-out.