

WHY CHILDREN ARE LEAVING THEIR HOMES? UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN EUROPE: WHAT TO LEARN FROM THEM?

More than 100,000 unaccompanied minors - mainly from Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea and Somalia - applied for asylum in 78 countries in 2015 (UNICEF).

These numbers do not take into account all children and young people who had to leave their homes and were displaced. They only represent those who applied for asylum, which are far from being the majority.

In my practice as an intercultural psychologist and trauma therapist, I am often asked: "Why do they come alone? - "Where are their parents?" - or "How can their families let them go by themselves?"

The answers to the «why» question are highly complex and far from having one homogenous answer for all.

Some of these children lost all their family members in their home country and came to Europe, the «continent of human rights» for survival.

Others, mainly from Syria and Irak, are members of families with many children, in which not all could be saved from war. A choice was made to «invest» the available savings to send one child abroad, hoping he/she would make it and start a new life.

Other families managed to reach the borders of Europe together (often to Turkey), but could not get further and sent their children.

And others again sent their children to Europe, hoping for a quick family reunification. Finally, some children have family members (grandparents, uncles, aunts) in some European countries and try to join them. Unfortunately, reunification rules do not always follow this logic: children can be unaccompanied and separated in one European country whereas their family member resides in another European country closeby. This is often the case with unaccompanied minors having family members in the United Kingdom and trying to «illegally» reach the UK after long weeks of awaiting in the «Calais Jungle»(1) in dangerous, unhygienic and undignifying living conditions.



In all of these cases, we should really refrain from making judgments about choices, priorities or value systems. We are not in a situation of critical survival, we are not in a situation where we need to make undecidable decisions, to quote the philosopher Heinz von Foerster. All I know as a practitioner is that none of these situations is easier than another.

In all cases, children carry heavy burdens on their shoulders: the burden of death and violence, or the burden of responsibility and “expected success”, or sometimes the burden of “having to be happy” because so much was invested in them. Or the administrative burden of managing to bring the rest of the family over. All of these children have lost what can be called their «comfort zone». A comfort zone can be represented by our home, our habits, the people we live with, the daily routine, the language we speak, the religion we practice. Exile takes away most of that, forcing children and young people to survive in «panic zone», until a new form of comfort can be found and developed in the host country.

Very often, these children develop dissociative narratives as a result of immense adaptation and integration skills. They learn the language, traditions and rules of the host country and maintain contact with family back home. However, many things become unsayable. They cannot share their sadness and despair, because the family is counting on them. They cannot share their difficulties, because they are luckier than the ones who stayed. In some cases, these children develop strong loyalty behaviour by forbidding themselves to be happy.

As Thierno Diallo writes in his autobiography (2) (translated from French),
« Five years have passed, I have grown, lost quite some illusions and developed other dreams and future projects, with, at the heart of it, my untouched and unsinkable quest for peace. But can one live in peace when knowing that over there, far away, unaccessible loved ones cannot live in peace?».

However, the description of the situation of these young people would not be complete if we didn't look at their resources. Unaccompanied minor children and young people are survivors. They show an incredibly high level of resilience, adaptation skills and willingness to learn.

Very often, the path towards the final destination is long and dangerous. Many children go through a long journey across Turkey, Greece and sometimes other European countries. Where they stay longer, they often pick some basic knowledge of the language and customs. Finally, upon arrival in the country that will host them, register them and accompany their integration, children quickly learn the local language, at least if given the opportunity to do so.

In 2014, the UNHCR and the Council of Europe published a comparative study on unaccompanied and separated asylum seeking and refugee children turning eighteen (3) in four European countries - Austria, Hungary, France and Sweden.

This study, based on interviews with unaccompanied minors and professionals, focuses on the main challenges faced by unaccompanied minors in their integration process. One of the main challenges resides in their access to social rights. Access to decent housing, employment, education, health care and non-discrimination remain the key factors to successful integration.

When asked the question: "If you could ask the decision-makers to do something for unaccompanied minors, what would you ask for?", most interviewed children answered: "I would ask for books or for the right to go to school."

When given the necessary support, encouragement and protection, unaccompanied minor children and young people have an incredible potential to develop their skills and participate actively in their new society.

Instead of focusing on why they came or on their sometimes terrible stories, it is time for mainstream media and public discourse to change the focus to the strong contribution of unaccompanied minors to our European societies.

In 2008, following an international seminar on young refugees organised by the Council of Europe, a group of young unaccompanied minors and refugees created the European network Voices of Young Refugees in Europe, VYRE.(4) Today, VYRE counts many members all across Europe and focuses its work on the contribution of young refugees to the development of European societies.

Many personal stories can be shared: Thierno arrived in France from Guinea at the age of 14. Today, he has a diploma, a job and has published a successful autobiography. A. arrived in Austria from Afghanistan at the age of 15. Today, he runs a youth-driven NGO for support and counselling to unaccompanied minors. M. arrived in Paris as an unaccompanied asylum seeker from Togo at the age of 15. He brought exceptional sewing skills from his home country where his aunt was running a textile shop. After a difficult integration process, M. is now working for a famous French Haute Couture brand.

These stories are not unique, we just need to look for them and to contribute to allowing more of them. If we start listening more to unaccompanied minors and if we look at their competencies, we could learn a lot about human resilience and intercultural learning.

And maybe the only answer to the question «why» would be: because they have a right to be happy, and the quest for happiness has no borders.

The author

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Footnotes

1. At the time of this article, the «Calais Jungle» has been entirely dismantled, with a promise for most

- unaccompanied minors to be allowed access to the UK.
2. Thierno Diallo: «Moi, migrant clandestin de 15 ans», la Nuée Bleue (2015).
 3. http://infomie.net/IMG/pdf/2014_unhcr_and_council_of_europe_report_transition_adulthood.pdf
 4. <https://www.facebook.com/WeAreVYRE/>