

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS¹

Violeta Quiroga
Chief researcher, IFAM Group
(Childhood and Family in Multicultural Environments)
Pere Tarrés Foundation - Ramon Llull University, Barcelona

The movement of migrant minors travelling without adults is a phenomenon of global proportions. Migration is a dynamic and changing phenomenon which calls for familiarity with its peculiarities on a constant and continuous basis. It is for this reason that this article will briefly explain who the unaccompanied minors are who migrate to Europe from the point of view of their contexts of origin and the motivations which lead these minors to emigrate from their home country at such a young age. The aim is to help improve the protection of these minors in both their countries of origin and in their destination countries.

On the European stage the migratory phenomenon known as "unaccompanied minors" appeared between 1980 and 1990. Although the migration of minors had been going on for centuries in the history both of Europe and the rest of the world, it was only in 1989, the year in which the Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified (1989), that the social status of "childhood" was developed and the rights attached to it became universal. The acceptance of this new category of childhood brought about a change in approaches and a protective perspective came into effect, whereby all children were seen as in need of protection and having a right to the care by the institutions having competencies to protect under-age persons.

This type of emigration, characterised by its own special features which differentiate it from that of adults, gives rise to a new perspective on the migratory pattern which questions some of the basic assumptions about international migration.

In the light of the arrival in the European continent of large numbers of minors unaccompanied by adults, in 1997 the Council of the European Union designated these foreign minors as Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs). In the same year, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) made the title official. Faced with this new situation, UNHCR and Save The Children accepted that the concept needed redefinition. An effort was made to replace the semantic scope of 'Unaccompanied Minor' by the introduction of the term 'Separated Minor'². In 2001, Art. 2. F. Council Directive 2001/55/CE defined Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) as:

"Nationals from third party countries or stateless individuals under the age of eighteen who have entered the territory of Member States unaccompanied by an adult responsible for them by law or custom, such that they are not under the care of such a person, or minors who are no longer accompanied following their arrival in the territory of Member States".

¹ This address forms part of an investigation which has now been concluded as part of the National I+D+i Programme 2006-09 by the former Ministry for Education and Science, dealing with *Unaccompanied Migrant Minors in Spain. Current situation and new trends* undertaken by the IFAM Research Group (Childhood and Family in Multicultural Environments) in the Pere Tarrés Foundation at Universidad Ramón Llull University. For more information see: V. Quiroga, A. Alonso and M. Soria. (2010). *Suenos de Bolsillo. Menores migrantes no acompañados en España* [Pocket Dreams. Unaccompanied Migrant Minors in Spain]. Barcelona: Unicef- Banco Banesto.

² This terminology is used in the UK, Ireland and some Scandinavian countries.

But the migration of UAMs is not only a matter for concern as regards their identity and life in their destination country; it is also part of a process, one which begins in their countries of origin, in the emergence of the migratory intentions of these minors and their families and which is a response to various source contexts, from economic situations to political and social situations, at both macro and micro levels.

A range of factors is to be found in the countries of origin which boost the migration of minors: powerful population growth; high and accelerating urban growth (many of the minors are from cities); a high proportion of the population under 15 years of age; a medium or low human development index (Maghreb and West Africa); economic inequalities and structural poverty; and countries in the grip of conflict. Other factors have been identified which cause minors to choose one destination country or another: the proximity of their country to Europe and/or ease of transport from the exit country; historical, economic or linguistic connections between the country of origin and the destination country; migratory precedents from the same origin in the arrival country; and reception legislation and policies in the destination country.

The reasons which drive UAMs to migrate are various and the same minor may often be responding to a combination of different causes, motivations and personal situation which explain the fact that they finally take the decision to emigrate and set out on their journey; but even so, among these different reasons there is usually one which stands out as the main reason. For a large proportion of the minors, the reasons for migrating echo the life stories of the minors in the reception countries, given that success and/or failure in settling in the reception countries can be explained, in part and in conjunction with other factors (access to the protection circuit, documentation, institutional support, presence of positive benchmarks, source family documentation etc.) by the reasons for migration. One of the hypotheses emerging from this analysis, and which should be tested, is the idea that the better defined the minor's migratory project is, including planning over a time period, the greater chance of success the minor has of settling in the destination country. Similarly, if the minor emigrates without a clear plan, the chances of failure are increased.

There are four main reasons why minors emigrate to European countries: economic, to improve their socio-cultural expectations, political, and family conflict situations (mainly in the case of the girls). Two further motivations have been identified regarding UAMs. In the first place a proportion of emigrating minors have expectations regarding social improvement, but this takes the form of a desire to earn a living and be successful on the sports field or in the world of the arts in Europe. And secondly there are those minors whose motivation for undertaking the journey has a strong spirit and feeling of adventure, common among adolescents. This has not been considered as an independent motive, but rather an overarching feeling which may complement others such as the search for a better life or flight from a family conflict situation.

Regarding the decision to emigrate and the involvement of the family, there are two main types of decision:

- a decision taken individually or in company with a group of peers (the result of the pre-adolescent or adolescent life cycle of a large proportion of the UAMs who arrive in Europe) to seek work, to improve their expectations for the future, or for adventure³. In these cases

³ In Spain, for example, over one third of the minors decide to come as a result of this kind of decision.

where it is the minors themselves who take the decision we are faced with different options regarding the involvement of the family: the family is unaware that the minor would like to migrate; the family finds out about their son's or daughter's decision to emigrate and their attitude is one of absolute rejection; or the family attitude is one of resignation, which amounts to support for the emigration project.

- the decision is a family decision taken to protect the minor, to help the family itself and/or to upgrade the minor's social conditions.

And it must be stressed that the adolescent phase means that these girl and boys are in a transitional stage, between the world of childhood and that of adulthood. It is hoped that in this phase they will grow into their adult responsibilities, but also that they will be allowed room to make the transition, with greater room for manoeuvre, circumstances which some will use to break out of a future they see as too predictable in their context of origin, because of the social or family situation, and set out on their journey to Western Europe.