

Invisible and Feminized Migration of Unaccompanied Girls: a Challenge for Child Care

Abstract

The objective of this article is to incorporate a gender perspective into the study of migration by shedding light on the experiences of unaccompanied minors. The study adopts a qualitative exploratory design and analyzes interviews conducted with child care professionals involved in the foster care of unaccompanied girls in a local administration in Spain. The findings reveal a strong relation between gender, migrant status, minority status, and inadequate detection, mobility patterns, and limited resource allocation for the care of unaccompanied girls. The professionals emphasize the need for training in gender perspectives, trafficking, and exploitation, as well as the inclusion of more psychologists and cultural mediators to better address the needs of these young girls. The research concludes that a gender-sensitive and decolonized perspective within the field of social work is essential in addressing the specific vulnerabilities faced by these young women and ensuring their full access to rights.

Girls and adolescents migrating alone represent a significantly understudied group in Europe (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020). Surprisingly, social services also lack the necessary experience and training to properly support and welcome these young individuals (Gerassi et al., 2021). Child care practitioners and international reports alike concur that the unique vulnerabilities faced by these young migrants stem from gender inequalities, both in their home countries and their destinations (Bjerneld et al., 2018). Astonishingly, policy makers have largely overlooked the gendered aspects of this migration, leading to a continuation of reception protocols that lack specific strategies, despite the recommendations (UNHCR, 2016).

Just like the rest of Europe, public administrations in Spain have barely implemented tailored support systems for this particular migratory group (Melgar et al., 2021). With the exception of a few foster centers dedicated to victims of trafficking (Fernández & Waisman, 2017), there remains a significant gap in addressing the specific vulnerabilities faced by these young migrants, hindering their full access to rights, particularly during their transition to adulthood (Torrado & Ceballos, 2023). It is precisely this void in the existing literature that we aim to overcome with the present text.

Drawing from an in-depth analysis of social services within a local Spanish administration, this article delves into the intricate challenges faced when providing care to female minors residing in residential centers. The primary objective is to shed light on these difficulties, paving the way for a transformative shift towards an innovative and gender-sensitive approach to social work practice.

In light of the diverse European legislation concerning the protection of migrant children (Bailleul & Senovilla, 2015), there is an important aspect that requires clarification. Specifically, within the context of a northern Spanish region under study, the state

legislation¹ defines an “unaccompanied foreign minor” as an individual “under the age of eighteen, who enters Spanish territory without the company of a responsible adult recognized as such by law or by custom, or a foreign minor who is abandoned after arriving in Spanish territory. In both cases, they are considered unaccompanied foreign minors until they are effectively placed under the care of a responsible adult.” Consequently, due to the decentralized nature of the Spanish governance model, it is the duty of regional social services providers to not only welcome these migrant adolescents but also assume their guardianship (Del Valle et al., 2013).

This paper unfolds in the following manner: To begin, a concise overview of the existing literature pertaining to unaccompanied migrant girls and the corresponding social work practices employed to support them is provided. Following that, the voices of dedicated public professionals engaged within the observed child care system are shared. Next, an in-depth analysis of the challenges encountered in their professional practice is conducted, considering the limited experience in this particular field. Lastly, the implications for specialized social services are thoroughly discussed.

Girls and Female Adolescents Who Travel Alone

While there exists a substantial body of research concerning women and mobilities (Donato et al., 2006), it is noteworthy that general investigations into migration and refugee studies frequently adopt a gender-neutral perspective, thereby overlooking the gendered dimensions of these phenomena (Hyndman, 2019). Consequently, research on youth mobility predominantly emphasizes the experiences and perspectives of male migrants and asylum seekers (Kohli & Kauko, 2017). This gender-neutral orientation has likewise had repercussions on the examination of the migration experiences of unaccompanied girls and

¹ Article 189 of the Royal Decree on Regulation of the Organic Law 4/2000 of 11 January on the rights and freedoms of foreigners in Spain and their social integration, after the amendments made by the Organic Law 2/2009.

female adolescents. Consequently, only a few investigations consider the gender differences in their trajectories (Belloni, 2020), and policies fail to identify the specific needs of girls. Therefore, child care services do not adequately cater to their needs (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020).

The omission of a feminist perspective within European migration and refugee policies (Fiddian, 2016) stands in stark contrast to the demographic reality that approximately half of the individuals embarking on migration to the continent are women (UNHCR, 2020). In the case of Spain, 47% of these migrants are minors (Statistics National Institute, 2023). However, similar to the rest of the European Union (Eurostat, 2023), only a small fraction of registered unaccompanied children in Spain are girls, accounting for 11%. Geographically, these girls mostly originate from Africa, particularly Morocco, with fewer coming from sub-Saharan regions.

The scarce literature on this type of migration in Spain verifies that, like in other European states, these girls follow migratory trajectories with specific strategies to bypass borders (Torrado & Ceballos, 2023). Power imbalances, social expectations, and gender norms influence these journeys, which are often motivated by instances of family abuse, sexual abuse, escape from genital mutilation, or the search for economic opportunities for themselves and their families (Torrado, 2015). Minors from sub-Saharan countries frequently travel within migrant smuggling networks or trafficking networks (Hadjab, 2021). Moreover, the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, both at the origin and during the journey, remains significantly high for girls and young women traveling alone (Pham et al., 2018; UNICEF ECARO, 2020).

In Spain, the social sciences have observed these migration routes and motivations with limited intensity, resulting in a limited body of literature on the subject. Some local studies focus on the involvement of Eastern European and sub-Saharan minors in prostitution

and trafficking networks (Alonso, 2010; García, 2010). Similarly, studies from both sides of the Mediterranean explore the experiences of *harragates*, young female Maghrebis who flee for familial reasons (Kime, 2015), and the *petites bonnes*, female youngsters who are destined for domestic work in Europe (Llorent, 2013).

Concerning social services, there are very few studies that adopt a gender-sensitive approach to examine the models of support within the European context (Ekström et al., 2019; UNICEF ECARO, 2020; Hosseini & Punzi, 2022). However, there is a consensus on the challenges that unaccompanied girls face in mixed centers shared with boys (Sirriyeh, 2013), as well as on the social determinants of mental health for these migrant and asylum-seeking girls, who experience higher rates of depression and post-traumatic stress compared to males (Mohwinkel et al., 2018).

Two factors distinguish the Spanish reception model for these minors. Firstly, similar to other neighboring European states such as France and Italy, the majority of these minors are received by specialized social services for child care. In contrast, Central European and Nordic states incorporate them into international protection procedures (Kanics et al., 2010). Secondly, the reception model itself varies. While foster families are predominant in the northern regions, southern European countries prioritize foster centers under the guidance of local authorities (Del Valle et al., 2013).

This article aims to contribute to an emerging field within the study of female migration and social work. It highlights that gender is not only associated with the lower volume of mobility, but also with the insufficient allocation of resources for understanding and addressing this issue.

Methodology

This study is part of a broader investigation on the migration of unaccompanied minors to [anonymized] ([anonymized]; [anonymized]). This region, situated in

[anonymized], hosts 98.7% of male youths², predominantly of African descent (82.5% from the Maghreb region and 10.3% from Sub-Saharan Africa). It is worth noting that a significant portion of these individuals, approximately 60.3%, are 16 years old or older. These adolescents typically reside in residential facilities, often managed by private organizations but funded by the public entity responsible for their protection ([anonymized]). In this context, individuals traverse a pathway characterized by successive stages encompassing initial attention, observation, the attainment of autonomy, and eventual emancipation.

To address the research gap concerning the migration experiences of sheltered girls and female adolescents, a previous qualitative study ([anonymized]) accessed all the records of unaccompanied female minors (n=30) under guardianship in [anonymized] between January 1, 2000, and December 31, 2021. For the purposes of this article, a comprehensive examination was undertaken on the records spanning from 2011 to 2021 (n=17) in order to gain insight into the most current attributes and features of this migratory phenomenon. Based on this review, interviews were carried out with professionals from [anonymized] who had worked with each of the unaccompanied girls received during that period.

Participants

The participants (n = 11) were purposefully selected based on their roles as reference professionals in the previously examined case files of these minors (n = 17). They represent diverse professional profiles and have been employed in various foster care centers (n=3) and social services centers (n=3) spanning the years from 2011 to 2021. All participants are affiliated with public social services in their capacity as professionals responsible for overseeing the care and reception of minors. The participant group encompasses the principal

² In line with conventional social classifications based on age and gender, the social services under observation categorized these fostered children and adolescents as either 'male' or 'female' when furnishing data to researchers. As cautioned by Corona et al. (2021, p. 882), "there is a notable dearth of comprehensive data pertaining to unaccompanied minors, particularly concerning those who are girls, individuals with disabilities, or those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+)." This shortage of data is, in part, attributable to the challenges associated with identifying these specific groups.

profiles within the Spanish child care system, including mental health professionals (psychologists, $n = 3$) and child care professionals (social educators, $n = 5$, and social workers, $n = 3$).

Procedure

The interviews were conducted between April and May 2022. Prior to each interview, professionals were required to sign a confidentiality agreement, ensuring the privacy and protection of the information shared. Furthermore, upon completion of the interview, professionals were provided with an audio file of the recorded session.

Drawing upon the findings from the previous study on the received female minors ([anonymized]) and the limited existing Spanish literature on this migration topic (Morante & Trujillo, 2009), an interview script was carefully prepared. The script focused on specific aspects related to the reception of unaccompanied girls, including the following areas: the process of identifying migrant minors, the trajectory of residential reception for these minors, specialized resources available for the reception of migrant minors, examination of the social networks of the minors (family or peers), and exploration of any potential connections with trafficking networks within certain case files.

Analysis

The interviews conducted with professionals were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The thematic analysis proposes a six-phase process of interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis: familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and, finally, producing the report. This allows us to identify, categorize, and conceptualize the ways in which gender influences the mobility, trajectories, and care of unaccompanied girls and female adolescents who migrate alone. Through this analysis, sub-themes were identified and reviewed, leading to the development of three overarching thematic blocks that describe

the main experiences conveyed by the interviewees: invisibilized and feminized migration, challenges in the initial reception by social services, and professional profiles and training.

Ethical Aspects

In compliance with the confidentiality and anonymity stipulations as set forth by the University of [anonymized] and the contract with [anonymized] for the execution of this applied research, two specific criteria have been instituted. First and foremost, the decision was made to conduct interviews with practitioners rather than migrant girls, in response to the request of local authorities who sought to mitigate the risk of retraumatization and other adverse mental health repercussions that might occur when revisiting traumatic experiences (Castillo, 2020). Secondly, stringent measures were applied to redact all identifying information and personal particulars pertaining to both the professionals and the young individuals in care from all documents utilized throughout the course of the investigation. These measures were taken to ensure the privacy and protection of all participants involved in this specific study.

Results

To begin, we provide a brief characterization of the unaccompanied girls previously studied. Subsequently, we present the findings from the interviews conducted with professionals, divided into four distinct sections: (1) an examination of invisibilized and feminized migration; (2) challenges encountered during the initial reception by social services; (3) the necessity of incorporating specific professional profiles and enhancing training; and (4) the implementation of effective practices in child care. These findings illuminate the manner in which professionals construe the essential significance of gender and the not-out-of-age migrant status in the migration journeys of unaccompanied girls and female adolescents.

Migration Profiles and Motivations

The unaccompanied girls who were fostered between 2011 and 2021 originated from various regions, including North Africa (n=9), Sub-Saharan Africa (n=4), Eastern Europe (n=1), and Southeast Asia (n=3). Sixty percent of these underage individuals, the vast majority of whom originate from North African countries, were received into care at the age of 17, while 16% entered the system at the age of 16. Minors below the age of 15 predominantly hail from West African regions. The study conducted on their migratory motives enables us to categorize them into three distinct groups: firstly, victims of exploitation encompassing sexual exploitation, domestic labor, or begging (n=7); secondly, family-related factors (n=8) such as forced marriage, violence against women, or family reunification; and lastly, a less common category involving personal advancement through employment or training (n=2).

Invisible and Feminized Migration

Based on our field work, it is evident that the limited visibility of girls and female adolescents who migrate alone stems from the dearth of professional and academic literature available to guide professionals in their work of providing care to these young women.

There is a lack of studies. It is necessary to study these female minors, due to their vulnerability. (Female social educator)

Generally, trafficking in women is far more studied than unaccompanied migrant girls. Minorities, in any aspect, are always less valued and have fewer resources.

(Female social educator)

Several professionals contend that there is comparatively less literature available on unaccompanied girls in relation to boys, primarily due to the fact that girls constitute a smaller proportion of the fostered youth. The interviewees posit that this disparity in migration volumes between genders is influenced by factors associated with gender roles. Thus, the various manifestations of patriarchy in countries of origin encourage male

migration as a means to enhance the family's economic prospects, assigning men the primary provider role. Conversely, women are expected to assume responsibilities pertaining to familial and domestic care.

It is the male gender that goes out to seek an economic, professional, personal improvement. And the woman remains providing care in the country of origin.

(Female social educator)

It may be something cultural, that men are the ones who assume that role of [making] money come to their family. (Female social worker)

When girls and female adolescents migrate alone, gender-related factors significantly shape their migration trajectories, which differ substantially from those of men.

Unaccompanied girls encounter a greater range of risks, contributing to their underrepresentation in migration records. Notably, they face heightened vulnerabilities, such as the pervasive risk of sexual violence and gender-based violence, both in their countries of origin and throughout their journeys.

They already live in their own society their own risks for being women. [...] you have to migrate thousands of kilometers, in a mainly male context [...] I think that they don't see that they have the possibility of trying to migrate alone. And those who do manage to migrate alone, you have to doubt the “alone”, since their processes have nothing to do with it. (Female social educator)

Regarding border crossings, Moroccan adolescents undertake perilous journeys by crossing borders in various ways, such as using *pateras* (dinghies) or evading police surveillance by means of boats or planes, often with forged documents and accompanied by family members.

They usually come in a less risky way, bus or plane, unlike the boys, who sometimes risk their lives. (Female psychologist)

Meanwhile, female minors from sub-Saharan countries frequently embark on their journeys in the company of migrant smuggling networks or trafficking networks.

Consequently, professionals acknowledge that detecting these cases poses greater challenges, as these minors strive to remain concealed from authorities. They emphasize the importance of vigilance in identifying potential indicators that a minor may be involved in a trafficking network.

Some minors are asked why they chose [anonymized] as their destination, and there are different answers. Some because they have relatives, acquaintances [...] Others affirm that they were brought here, the question is who brought them? Did you know they came [anonymized] Sometimes it's because there's someone here who uses them as “dunks” to sell drugs. (Female psychologist)

Similarly, professionals also establish a link between the involvement of female minors in trafficking networks and their own families.

Sometimes the family of origin lies to the professionals because it is the families that have originated these situations [...] When they escape from the centers to go to another region, it is generally to return to their captors. Sometimes families reiterate the wish that they go to a specific place. (Female social educator)

Difficulties in the First Reception of Social Services

The identification of these minors represents the initial phase in the institutional reception process. The challenges associated with their detection arise from the invisibility they may experience due to family strategies or involvement in exploitation networks.

Professionals recognize the dearth of tools and dedicated protocols to effectively identify these minors.

It is very difficult to know if the minor has been captured by a trafficking network. If they don't count it, the tools to detect them are very few and weak. The girls are

generally accompanied by relatives, so their detection as “alone” is more difficult.

(Female psychologist)

Detection comes by institutionalization. They come mainly from police units. Few cases [are] derived from social services. When there is this invisibility of the female migrant, it is accentuated in the case of minors. It is difficult to detect them, because they do not usually migrate alone. And, if the objective is [to obtain] the documentation [residence permit], then the family does make the minor visible, but out of a particular interest, [...] making the rest of the minor's process invisible.

(Female social educator)

Consequently, the role of Social Services in identifying minors is significantly constrained, often relying on the police for detection. According to the interviewees, the detection of migrant girls and female adolescents by social services may occur when their family decides to disclose their irregular status, aiming to facilitate their eligibility for a residence permit as an “unaccompanied” minor. Alternatively, detection may transpire when girls have lived in Spain for several years in an invisible state within their extended family, and instances of neglect or abandonment are identified (e.g., when relatives return to their country of origin, leaving the minor unattended).

They leave Morocco because the family runs out of money [because the father died]. She goes with her mother and brother to Brussels [Belgium], where one of her sisters lives, but there is no room in her house. So the mother returns to Morocco and the two brothers travel to [anonymized]. Finally, she goes to [anonymized] because she knows a male minor from another [foster] center and this tells her that he is fine [in] the city.

(Female psychologist)

Conversely, a significant number of the identified cases of the studied girls were initiated through self-reporting by the minors themselves. Instances include when they

voluntarily approached the police station, an NGO, or social services. In these situations, professionals concur on the notable influence exerted by the family in this process of “detection”:

The fact that the minor shows up voluntarily at the police station shows that the minor has someone who has accompanied her [...] Usually, she knows someone, who could be a friend or family. Sometimes, if they know people in [city, anonymized], they are afraid to say it [...] This information would really make it easier for professionals to get to know them and get an overview of the situation and the network. (Female social worker)

Once detected and identified, the minor is placed in a first reception center. The majority of professionals emphasize the critical importance of the first two weeks of reception, along with the challenges that arise during this short period, as there are no dedicated centers specifically designed for the reception of girls, whether local or migrant. Consequently, these initial days are experienced with considerable uncertainty, not only by the minors themselves but also by the professionals who are confronted, firstly, with discrepancies in the accounts provided by the minor regarding their migratory journey and, as a result, with the inability to fully address their genuine needs. Secondly, there is a high risk of the minor absconding, particularly in the case of adolescent victims of exploitation.

You cannot speak of a pattern [in the escapes], due to the small number of minors. It is difficult to avoid them, you cannot deprive a minor of their liberty, unless there is a judicial measure. In the juvenile center you cannot deprive them [of freedom of movement], because you would be violating their rights. It's hard to match those rights with the protection you want to give. (Female social educator)

The risk of absconding is not limited to the initial days of reception but persists throughout the entire process of caring for the minor. This risk is influenced by various

factors, frequently intertwined with gender-related issues. These factors include feelings of discomfort and insecurity stemming from cohabiting with boys, mental health issues, involvement in intimate or sexual relationships outside the shelter, mistrust towards professionals, and prolonged waiting times for the resolution of bureaucratic procedures, such as obtaining a residence permit.

In the case of the [escapes of] girls, the pattern is diffuse. The fact of putting them in with boys, when they come from a culture in which being in a mixed center can be difficult, has something to do with it. (Female psychologist)

Many times, it is due to borderline disorders, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress [...] Symptoms and behaviors similar to the native ones: consumption, promiscuity, etc [...] One way to avoid escapes would be to improve the training of professionals; smaller centers; more supervision, etc. (Female psychologist)

They ran away when they wanted to have meetings with their partners. [They are] escapes caused by toxic [affective] relationships. (Female social educator)

Professional Profiles and Training

The interviews have brought to light the necessity of incorporating two professional profiles, namely psychologists and cultural mediators, into the child care teams, which are currently underrepresented. Additionally, the interviews emphasize the importance of training that encompasses a gender perspective and demonstrates sensitivity towards the cultural backgrounds of these young women. Professionals highlight the significance of cultural mediators as trusted and relatable figures who can mitigate communication gaps and misunderstandings arising from cultural differences with social workers and social educators. In line with this, some interviewees also underscore that while the gender of cultural mediators may not be relevant in interventions with migrant minors in general, it is crucial for

mediators working with migrant girls and adolescents to be women. This is because minors often exhibit heightened suspicion towards male practitioners.

Mediators are a tool to prevent escapes. The girls are more distrustful than the boys, so there must be a benchmark for stability in the centers, since the technical teams tend to change [...] The gender of the professional who intervenes with the minor influences girls more than boys. (Female social educator)

However, the interviews reveal a consensus regarding the limited availability of this professional profile in interventions involving migrant minors. Furthermore, unaccompanied girls in [anonymized] are predominantly transferred to public residential centers that are mixed-gender (including both boys and girls) and lack specialization in the care of migrant children. These centers also do not have cultural mediators, which poses challenges to effective communication and the establishment of a trusting environment where the minor feels understood by professionals, both as a woman and as an adolescent migrant.

The fact of putting them in with boys, when they come from a culture in which being in a mixed center can be difficult, has something to do with it. The female minors feel alone and perceive a lack of understanding on the part of the technicians, at times.

The escaping probably comes from an emotional problem that has not been detected in time. (Female psychologist)

The significance of psychologists as a professional profile and the need for therapeutic intervention have been corroborated by the majority of the interviewed professionals. The findings suggest that migrant minors, particularly girls, exhibit higher vulnerability levels compared to boys.

The degree of fragility of the female minors is higher. When there is a female minor with an obvious disorder, although not diagnosed, there are no specific centers to

work in an interdisciplinary way in an open environment ['open' foster homes].

Without therapists, it is impossible to intervene. (Female social educator)

In addition to the aforementioned vulnerability, it is important to acknowledge that these young people are in a state of geographical and biographical transition, requiring them to reconstruct their identities within an unfamiliar environment.

There is a lack of psychology professionals who intervene with minors. It is necessary for these professionals to talk with the children so that the cultural distance is less, about sexuality, technologies, etc. (Female psychologist)

Psychological attention is necessary in all aspects, regardless of the immigration reason, since everyone faces the “immigration mourning.” (Female social worker)

Professionals advocate for the inclusion of more psychologists and emphasize the significance of collaborative efforts between psychologists and mediators. A considerable number of minors requiring mental health services lack the basic proficiency in Spanish necessary to comprehend therapy dynamics. Moreover, many exhibit skepticism towards psychological interventions as a means of support. Hence, the presence of a supportive figure becomes crucial in assisting the minor in overcoming these barriers and accompanying them throughout their psychotherapeutic journey.

The scarcity of mediators influences the possibility of this [therapeutic] service, since the telephone translator is not suitable for psychological therapies, so this care is limited by language barriers. (Female social worker)

Lastly, the interviewees validate the necessity of training that incorporates a gender perspective and integrates an intercultural approach. Specifically, regarding training on trafficking and exploitation, it should be extended to all stakeholders involved in the process of child care, including law enforcement agencies.

More training is needed. Working with girls is different. You have to develop a series of social and professional skills, and applying the methodology to girls is different.

(Female social educator)

Good Practices in Child Care

Despite the heterogeneity of this migration phenomenon, professionals who have interacted with these young women concur that engaging and collaborating with their families, if feasible and beneficial, facilitates the reception process and enhances the well-being of the child. Initially, it cultivates trust between the female minor and the child care professionals, thereby reinforcing the bond between them.

Family is very important. If you create a good bond with the family, it is a very useful tool; as long as the relationship with the family is perceived to be beneficial. We [must] not harm the girl [through] contact with the family. (Female social worker)

Secondly, when the family actively participates in the pathway planning, they gain insight into the circumstances of the minor and consequently comprehend the necessity for the minor to receive vocational training for future employment. In contrast, when family involvement is lacking and the predominant pressure revolves around sending remittances back home, the minors can experience considerable distress, leading them to abscond in an attempt to comply with the family's expectations.

Many have the imposition of the families to achieve an economic level, to be able to support their families in origin. This great responsibility means that the female minor sometimes has the need to escape, in order to achieve her goal. They need to fulfill the favor that the family has asked of them. (Female social educator)

Finally, several professionals emphasize the potential benefits of involving the extended family residing in Spain or Europe in the intervention process. They argue that

including these family members is important as they form part of the social networks of unaccompanied girls and can provide support as the girls transition into adulthood.

We did not want to separate the family from the minors, both of origin [nuclear] and destination [extensive]. We even went so far as to give permission for weekends to foster this bond [with the extended family]. (Female psychologist)

Discussion

Based on the insights shared by professionals, three overarching themes emerged, providing valuable recommendations for enhancing social work practices. Firstly, the analysis focuses on the appropriateness of child care services and their resources in addressing the specific needs of female migration. Secondly, the role of family and other ethnic peers is examined, considering their influence as both protective and risk factors for these girls and adolescents. Lastly, the challenges faced by practitioners in their role as supportive individuals are discussed.

Feminized Trajectories: a challenge for child care

Despite the limited European academic literature on the migration of unaccompanied girls, it is widely acknowledged by both international organizations and professionals that their trajectories and risks differ from those faced by young men who migrate alone (UNICEF ECARO, 2019; Brook & Ottemöller, 2020). The routes and strategies employed by unaccompanied girls are less known and more varied than those of their male counterparts, which presents challenges in identifying them as unaccompanied minors (UNICEF ECARO, 2020). Both the long journeys undertaken by sub-Saharan and Asian girls (Shelley, 2010) and the shorter ones by North African girls (Melgar et al., 2021) involve accessing Europe through means that remain hidden from public institutions responsible for border control and social services. These include irregular arrivals concealed by nuclear or extended families, support from transnational youth networks, and exploitation by adult networks, among others.

The professional discourses indicate that there is often a significant time gap between the irregular border crossing and the detection by social services. This temporal distance exposes these girls to a higher risk of rights violations compared to boys (Torrado, 2015). The voluntary or forced invisibility they experience also suggests the presence of a significant number of undetected young migrants (García, 2010), particularly those who fall victim to exploitation (UNICEF ECARO, 2019).

The results demonstrate that the expertise and training of social service providers are primarily focused on male unaccompanied young migrants (Kohli, 2006). Consequently, the lack of understanding regarding the specific vulnerabilities of girls (Gerassi et al., 2021) significantly hinders their proper identification (Fernández & Waisman, 2017). The Council of Europe has already defined these specific vulnerabilities (Skehan et al., 2018), which include trafficking, sexual exploitation, violence, sexual abuse, and limited access to asylum, particularly when family violence, including forced marriage, is a reason for migrating to Europe alone (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for social services to incorporate these specific risks into their reception models (Bjerneld et al., 2018).

Once detected, as highlighted in the results, the lack of specialization often leads to inadequate attention for these young women, particularly regarding their mental health (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2005). International organizations propose gender-sensitive approaches and emphasize the limited impact of existing facilities, while highlighting good practices (UNICEF ECARO, 2019). The absence of a gender perspective in the analyzed actions contributes to increased vulnerability for women and girls in refugee and migrant centers (Birchall, 2016). Additionally, it allows certain professional discourses to emerge, such as the perception of some families' economic situations as “welfare tourism” when social services become aware of their resources (Keskinen, 2016). These scenarios deviate from the legal category of “unaccompanied,” which is perceived as “disadvantaged” and

therefore deserving of assistance (Barberis & Boccagni, 2014). Behind this stigmatization, studies reveal the existence of girls for whom migration is part of a personal project (Melgar et al., 2021) driven by changing expectations regarding their future, both for young men and young women in North Africa (Vacchiano, 2018). Migration for these young women represents a means of accessing education and employment opportunities that are limited for women in their countries of origin (Kime, 2020), making migration a form of liberation (Birchall, 2016). The aspirations for autonomy among these young women in Europe can also account for their compliance with the itineraries proposed by social services, as evidenced in the results.

Another challenge in child care pertains to the reception in specialized centers specifically designed for young girls. The discourse analysis attributes the absence of such dedicated centers to the relatively lower number of fostered girls and the limited knowledge surrounding this form of migration. Hence, the deficiency in comprehensive European research regarding the migration experiences of young females and immigration policies, which results in the invisibility of women's migratory trajectories (Sirriyeh, 2013), provides a rationale for the establishment of existing mixed-gender centers designed to accommodate both male and female individuals.

These centers do not effectively facilitate the reestablishment of a normal life, which is the primary objective of social work with unaccompanied minors (Kohli, 2007). Studies assessing the suitability of the mixed-gender model (Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017) reveal evident challenges arising from cohabitation with men, including the need to avoid shared spaces and the potential for retraumatization through interactions with other men. Furthermore, the sense of security and belonging within these facilities is compromised, as young women are more susceptible to social pressures from men both within and outside the centers (Bjernerud et al., 2018). It is worth noting that these centers are often managed by local

religious organizations (Torrado, 2016), which can occasionally present difficulties for the religious practices of young women (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011). Conversely, these studies propose the creation of safe and gender-sensitive spaces within reception centers (Kohli & Kaukko, 2017), taking into account the fact that many of these young women have experienced restrictions on their presence in public spaces, both in their countries of origin and during their journeys (UNICEF ECARO, 2019). With this perspective, some professionals interviewed have advocated for the involvement of female cultural mediators in their daily practice, as well as the presence of female practitioners in support roles, given their enhanced ability to establish emotional connections (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020). It is important to note that in the region under study, it has been observed that girls are more vulnerable than young men in terms of their emotional well-being (Mohwinkel et al., 2018).

These identified risk and protective factors lead us to the second part of our analysis.

Peers and Family: Risk or Protective Factors?

As previously mentioned, the invisibility of unaccompanied girls necessitates the involvement of other migration actors, such as family members and peers, which poses challenges for social services to incorporate (Montesino & Jiménez, 2015). This calls for a shift in the understanding of these girls' migration and, consequently, the territorial dimensions of social work, which has traditionally been rooted in “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Glick, 2002).

The limited research conducted in Europe on this form of migration indicates that the trajectories often involve spaces that are socially associated with “the private or the hidden” (Morante & Trujillo, 2009, p. 5), wherein individuals posing as relatives are not always protective factors despite their seemingly supportive role. Interviews and reports from international organizations describe journeys in which young female people have traveled with other adults who have falsely claimed to be their relatives (UNICEF ECARO, 2020).

Upon reaching their destination, these adults may subject the female minors to domestic labor (Melgar et al., 2021) or, as our own research has documented, exert control over their behavior in Europe on behalf of the family of origin.

Therefore, our analysis concludes that social services must acknowledge the diversity of family situations associated with this migration. Moving beyond a colonial approach in social work that views the family and the country of origin as environments of deprivation and social problems (Razack, 2005), it is also important to recognize that girls and family members, particularly women, may be active participants in the decision to migrate and in the formulation of the migration project as a means to mitigate the risks of the journey (Belloni, 2020). In our fieldwork, we have observed that mothers, sisters, and aunts have played crucial roles in families where there may be violence against these young women or against other women, facilitating their escape to avoid forced marriages (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020). Alternatively, they have significantly contributed to the irregular arrival in Europe. Thus, to effectively incorporate the family of unaccompanied girls into social work practice with a supportive role ([anonymized]), adopting a gender approach could prove essential.

In contrast, certain family networks, including women, can serve as risk factors. The identified cases of female adolescents who were rendered invisible as servants in the households of relatives in Europe are indicative of child exploitation, a phenomenon not confined to North Africa alone (Kime, 2015; Llorent, 2013), but prevalent worldwide (Black, 2002). However, in the studied region, these cases had not been recognized as instances of exploitation, highlighting the need for supplementary training to enhance detection strategies in social, health, and educational services. It is crucial to develop the capacity to identify such situations through the behaviors and accounts of young individuals (Melgar et al., 2021).

In other instances, child care professionals may lack sufficient knowledge to discern whether an unaccompanied girl is migrating independently with the objective of family

reunification (UNICEF ECARO, 2020) or is involved in an exploitation network (Fernández & García, 2020). Many of the minors under study can fall into both profiles simultaneously, as they may be coerced by adults, including both female and male relatives, into concealing their true circumstances from professionals (Kumar, 2014). There are studies that caution against the tendency for “children from Africa to disappear from social services' care” (Chase & Statham, 2005, p. 15). This phenomenon has been observed in the studied region, leading us to conclude that the lack of specialized housing for female minors who are victims of trafficking creates a favorable environment where, within the current model of 'open' foster homes, “girls can come and go, thereby facilitating the traffickers' access to the child” (Fernández & Waisman, 2017, p. 515).

Other instances of disappearances, categorized as 'runaways,' are associated with Asian minors who remain even more invisible to social services in southern Europe, despite the ample literature available on this topic in other parts of the continent. Vietnamese adolescents identified on the border between the studied region and France were harbored by a network of adults for the purpose of sexual exploitation. This region forms part of a route described in international literature (Huda, 2006; Vu & Sebtaoui, 2020), where fieldwork indicates that rural families turn to these criminal organizations to repay debts (Summers & Hoffman, 2002). Similar to findings from other European studies (Chase & Statham, 2005), it was discovered that these girls had previously come to the attention of social services in another Spanish region, from where they had also fled.

The limited access of the interviewed professionals to international studies has further contributed to an imprecise diagnosis of the sexual exploitation experienced by a young Maghrebi woman at the hands of other young individuals from her ethnic background, outside of organized criminal networks. This form of exploitation is part of a criminal practice that has already been documented in various reports by the Spanish police (Melgar et

al., 2021). Moreover, from a feminist social work perspective, the intervention should have taken into account that these “romantic and sexual relationships between children and adult men” are invariably “inherently abusive” (Thorburn & Beddoe, 2021, p. 73). Consequently, existing protocols against sexual exploitation should have been activated.

Practitioners as Supportive Persons

In addition to the previously discussed need for “stable family support and motivation,” the study by Bjerneld et al. (2018, p. 309) also concludes that another factor contributing to the integration and adaptation of women in the destination country is having “supportive people to talk to.” These compassionate individuals, who provided encouragement, support, and care, and became new role models for these women, were primarily staff members at social services. Female psychologists and child care professionals involved in our field work have also echoed this conclusion, emphasizing the importance of a gender-sensitive approach. This approach allowed for a better understanding of the girls’ past experiences and addressed the broader issue of being female, which is both a local and global concern. These factors played a significant role in supporting and accompanying these young women, facilitating their transition towards rebuilding their ordinary lives (Kohli, 2007) and replacing their previous sense of despair with hope (Dominelli, 2016). However, these professionals noted that the practice would have been even more effective if they had received adequate training in intercultural skills during their social work education (McDonald, 2016).

Lastly, the interviews and studies also reveal that the skills necessary for working with girls and young women are not exclusive to female social workers and social educators; they extend to other professionals such as mediators and psychologists. All of these professionals face the challenge of shifting from a vertical practice characterized by professional monologues to a more dialogical approach, as the young women themselves

demand a dialogue (Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017) and real opportunities to contribute to defining their own pathway planning (Wade, 2011).

Conclusion and Implications

This article highlights the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach in Social Work practice to enhance the care provided to unaccompanied girls. By doing so, we can effectively address the existing challenges in supporting this highly vulnerable and understudied population.

In terms of our fieldwork, there are several proposals that should be implemented to address the specific vulnerabilities recognized internationally (Skehan et al., 2018). Firstly, we need to break the cycle of limited foster care for girls, lack of awareness, insufficient literature, and lack of expertise in the short term. Other countries on the continent have conducted studies on these migrations, which can contribute to enhancing the support provided to certain profiles of unaccompanied girls, such as those involved in forced domestic work or trafficking. It is essential that these studies are accessible to social services nationwide.

Secondly, training for practitioners in social services should be prioritized, as well as for professionals in other public services like the police, health, and education sectors (Kohli, 2007; Bjerneld et al., 2018). This training should encompass identifying potential victims of abuse, trafficking (Okech et al., 2017), forced domestic work (Melgar et al., 2021), and other risk factors. Additionally, specialized care during the initial days and weeks, when there is a higher likelihood of “escapes” and disappearances, should be emphasized (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2005). Furthermore, training should focus on implementing a gender-sensitive approach that addresses the structural elements of gender and racial oppression (Gerassi et al., 2021).

Thirdly, the process of establishing multiagency protocols, aimed at improving coordination between police and social services, should incorporate training and awareness-raising. These efforts will enable professionals to recognize key warning signs of specific vulnerabilities in unaccompanied girls (Melgar et al., 2001).

Fourthly, a transnational and gender-focused approach presents a challenge for social services involved in this context. In order to address the prevailing deficit in comprehension concerning the historical experiences of girls (Bjerneld et al., 2018) an imperative is placed on the adoption of a decolonized approach within the realm of social work practice. This approach acknowledges the influence of race on the neglect of the distinctive vulnerabilities associated with these girls. This practice should also consider the clash between gender roles in the girls' countries of origin and their destination cultures. Additionally, considering the emotional support needs of these girls, social services staff should strive to acquire skills in active listening and adopt a community-based approach within foster centers. This approach would enable addressing community control by males and involving young female role models and peers from diverse ethnic backgrounds (UNICEF ECARO, 2019).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study within the gender approach. Firstly, the interviews were conducted in a southern European region, and there is limited existing literature and expertise in these countries compared to the rest of the continent. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entirety of Europe; however, they do contribute to improving the current state of research. Secondly, the professionals interviewed may have had cultural backgrounds that differed significantly from the young women studied, given the predominance of "white staff" in Spanish social services (Dominelli, 2017). Lastly, there is a need for future research that actively includes the voices of unaccompanied girls, predominantly of African origin, which can be achieved through participatory action research (Kaukko, 2016).

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Author 1, Author 2 & Colleague.

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