Unaccompanied Refugee Minors – Findings from a Research Project

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The number of unaccompanied refugee minors seeking asylum in Europe has risen rapidly. This puts pressure on the receiving countries and calls for good integration policies. On the one hand, these asylum seekers are children and thus should be treated as migrants in a vulnerable situation requiring special care according to their needs, but on the other hand the receiving countries seek to limit the number of asylum seekers, including unaccompanied children. Attempts have been made to harmonize policies and procedures in Europe, but they still vary significantly between the countries. This research showed that Finland and the other Nordic countries have fairly well functioning reception systems based on the best interest of the child, but there are problems related to insufficient cooperation between authorities and shortcomings in language training, education and labor market support.

Keywords: refugees, migrants, integration, unaccompanied minors, asylum seekers.

Introduction

The number of unaccompanied or separated refugee minors (URM) seeking asylum in Europe has risen drastically, from 12,730 in 2013 to 23,075 in 2014 (Eurostat 2015) and preliminary data indicate a further big increase in 2015; in Finland the number of applicants was 453 by the middle of August, whereas their total number was 196 in 2015 (The Finnish Immigration Service 2015). This is also the case in Sweden, where the number of applicants was 4,546 by the end of June, twice the number the year before (The Swedish Migration Agency 2015).

Most of the unaccompanied minors come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Eritrea, Somalia and other African countries. The increase reflects the deteriorating situation in the countries of origin. In Afghanistan, the Taliban and other armed groups use children as combatants, sex slaves and suicide bombers. Large numbers of youngsters flee Eritrea to escape the indefinite and harsh military service, where beatings, torture and hard labor are common, children as young as 15 are recruited. In Syria at least 13,000 children have been killed since the beginning of the conflict, schools are attacked and numerous armed groups recruit children as soldiers (Becker 2015).

The receiving countries are faced with challenges ranging from initial accommodation to integration issues. The refugee minors should be treated as migrants in a vulnerable situation requiring special care according to their needs, but as the receiving countries seek to limit the number of asylum seekers, many cannot follow the principles regarding minors because of the great number of influx of refugees.

As both asylum seekers and children, the unaccompanied minors are in a precarious situation. Treating the child as subordinate to asylum seeker will lead to very different social results than when being a child is given priority over being asylum seeker (Vitus and Lidén 2010). Unaccompanied refugee minors are fully dependent on the child welfare services. Still, they are not unconditionally seen as children in need of care, but often regarded as "anchor children", sent by their parents to seek asylum in order to later bring in their family.

Almost all unaccompanied minors who apply for residence permit in a European country must undergo certain common procedures including age assessment, family tracing, placement in accommodation and the assignment of a legal guardian or representative. They are given access to health services and education. The legislation and practices surrounding the unaccompanied minors differ considerably in Europe.

Care is usually provided until the minor reaches the age of 18 and formally becomes an adult. Turning 18 may in some countries cause a change in the residence permit status and generally URMs lose their right to specific benefits and entitlements they had as refugee minors, also their right to family reunification if the procedure is not completed by that age (e.g. in Finland). In those countries, where the extension of the residence permit after coming of age (18) is uncertain (e.g. in Denmark), the URMS face a stressful situation, which can have consequences for their well-being and motivation to integrate.

These issues were addressed in the HALATEN-Project – From Vulnerable Childhood to Healthy and Safe Adulthood (2013–2015), which was financed by the European Refugee Fund and coordinated by Turku University of Applied Sciences. The objective was to enhance integration of unaccompanied minors to Finnish society and provide support and social networks for these youngsters in the new home country. The role of the Institute of Migration was to analyze practices in reception and integration of unaccompanied refugee minors and pinpoint problem areas and less successful policies and propose amendments.

In order to evaluate and single out problem areas in the reception and integration of unaccompanied refugee minors, thirteen interviews were made with young people in the Turku area who had a background as unaccompanied refugee minors (ten men and three women from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Iraq and Somalia). Eight social workers and administrative personnel were also interviewed. The main findings based on the interviews were published in 2014 with the title *"Haluun koulutusta, haluun työtä ja elämän Suomessa. Yksintulleiden alaikäisten pakolaisten kotoutuminen Varsinais-Suomessa"* (I want education, I want work and a life in Finland. The integration of unaccompanied refugee minors in the county of Varsinais-Suomi) (Björklund 2014). The focus of the project was regional, but many of the findings have relevance on a national and international level.

The findings from the project were further analysed and the scope extended to the other Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) in a subsequent report *Unaccompanied refugee minors in Finland. Challenges and practices in a Nordic context* (Björklund 2015). The question of the existence of different hegemonic discourses about asylum seeking minors in the Nordic countries and the consequences of these was also studied. Additional information was obtained in later discussions with professionals and administrators. This article is a summary of the findings published in the aforementioned reports.

Adapting to a new country

Many of the unaccompanied minors do not seek asylum in the country where they turn up, some countries are transit points to other destinations (Shuteriqi 2013). A significant number of unaccompanied minors have prior experiences in several countries within the EU. Departure for another country depends on the degree of integration and the availability of protection services. Stopping in another country than the preferred is not necessarily a satisfactory choice. The final destination has not been clear to all children at the time of leaving their home country, during the journey or even when arriving in Finland. Unaccompanied minors admit more often than adult asylum seekers that their motivations for the entry into the country are economic and a desire to receive education in Finland (Policies, practices and data… 2014).

There is a culture of mistrust embedded in the asylum procedure. The URMs must convince skeptical authorities that they are minors and in need of protection, not adults or "anchor children" sent by their parents to take advantage of the asylum system. On the other hand the young refugees for their part mistrust the authorities. It might be difficult for them to perceive others as trustworthy. They fear that the information they give can be used as evidence against them in the asylum process. It may also be difficult for them to establish confidential relations to professionals, because such generally lack reciprocity.

Because of such mistrust it is common for URMs to keep silent about their past lives and only partly disclose information about their flight and reasons for applying for asylum, omitting facts that could weaken their cause. They might also have been instructed by their families not to reveal facts and thoughts to outsiders. Much research attributes the silence to traumatic experiences relating to the flight, silence as a way to deal with deep disturbances. It can also be interpreted as a sign of "functional distrust" that allows to maintain a level of integrity allowing survival in a potentially hostile environment. Yet another reason is that unaccompanied minors, like any other adolescents, are absorbed in their daily life and not interested in looking backwards (Kohli 2006).

I have talked with some youngsters about this, some say that they have forgotten what happened during the journey, but the memories are returning. Typically they have just been put on the ship with nobody to meet them here. They have reported to the customs office or to the police station and applied for asylum. But they don't want to talk about how much the family is in debt for their journey. I think that they are forbidden to talk about it, because smugglers might get revealed and so it can even be dangerous to talk. (Counsellor)

Coming to a foreign country with a different culture not being able to understand the language is a bewildering experience. They miss their families and in combination with traumatic experiences the consequences may be somatic and psychological symptoms (Helander & Mikkonen 2002; Mikkonen 2013). Thus active forgetting can be a method to protect themselves (Jokinen 2010).

Usually they keep a facade not revealing what goes on inside, but every now and then they suddenly feel an urge to talk, at times even for a couple of hours, telling about what is going on in their home country... Afterwards they have regrets and feel bad about it and suffer from nightmares. (Caretaker)

Loneliness and isolation is one of the greatest problems of the URMs. It is common for them to feel isolated from other people and from their origins and past (Kohli & Mather 2003, 207). Having no family present, they seek belonging to social collectives and places. Because it is difficult for them to make friends with native Finnish youth, it is common to turn to others in the same situation. The unaccompanied minors share the experience of being newly arrived in Finland. Even though they originate in different countries and cultures, not sharing a common language, the relationships with other young refugees and particularly other unaccompanied minors that they live with are important to them. Like other youth they mostly establish friendships with others of the same gender and age (Wernesjö 2014).

I don't have many Finnish friends. It is easy to make friends with foreigners. If you are out somewhere, like at the bus station, you can spot a foreigner and it is easy to talk to that person, because we may have something in common. But with Finns it's more difficult. Even sitting next to a Finn on the bus, can't really say why. And now, even when I am with Finns in school, I have no Finnish friends. It's not because I don't want to make friends, but they don't easily trust other people and then I'm a bit shy, like they are. But I have many foreign friends, maybe it will change with time. I get along with everybody it it's like working in a group, but it's all in school, not that they would ask about my life or I about their. (Woman, 21)

One of the highest priorities of the URMs is reunification with their family in Finland. This became considerably more difficult with the changes in legislation 2010. According to section 38 issuing a residence permit on the basis of family ties to an unmarried minor child require that the child is a minor on the date when the residence permit application is decided. (Aliens Act 38 § 2010). In practice family reunification became extremely difficult, because there are practical obstacles for the family to apply for residence permit, since they must apply at a Finnish embassy abroad. The financial costs including travel can be considerable, and the minor can come of age before the application is decided upon (Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden...2014).

Almost every one of the interviewed had applied for family reunification, but only two had been successful. The social workers and caretakers described reunification as a difficult process in all stages. The minors suffer from being separated from their family, and have high hopes of getting at least one family member to Finland. In worst cases this leads to psychological problems, especially when they have to give up their hopes.

Elements Of Integration

Attending school and getting an education is of central importance for the integration of refugee minors. They are a heterogeneous group regarding e.g. gender, age ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background and previous education. They come from countries where their schooling often has been of low standard, insufficient or disrupted. Many of them have missed many years of school because of displacement. Also psychosocial and mental health problems impair their school success (Helander & Mikkonen 2002; De Wal Pastoor 2014).

The prerequisite for attending school in Finland is fluency in Finnish or Swedish. The URMs have Finnish classes already at the reception centre, but the motivation to learn the language may be lacking as long as they are in the asylum process. "*I had little motivation to learn Finnish as long as I did not know if I can stay or had to leave the country*", as one interviewee expressed it.

Immigrant children of compulsory school age may be offered instruction preparing them for basic education. Studying is supported with the help of class room assistants, social workers and cultural interpreters. Learning difficulties are prevented through guidance counselling (Policies, practices...2014). Those who have passed the age of compulsory education on arrival can study at a folk high school or on a study programme for adults at an upper secondary school. All those who have completed the basic education syllabus or who have otherwise acquired corresponding skills are eligible for general upper secondary education. The number of immigrants in upper secondary education has not proportionally kept up with increasing immigration. One of the main reasons for this is that upper secondary school requires good skills in Finnish or Swedish (Osallisena Suomessa... 2013).

Vocational studies form an alternative to upper secondary education. Before vocational education, immigrants may participate in preparatory education and training. The duration ranges from six months to one year. The objective of this preparatory training is to improve the student's language skills, coping skills and other skills needed in vocational education and training (Immigrant education in Finland, undated).

It is difficult for young immigrants who have arrived in Finland after the age of 15 to learn the language well enough to be able to successfully complete basic education and continue to upper secondary school or vocational education. They are let off easier and not required to take the test in mother tongue intended for Finnish- or Swedish-speaking students, but can take the test entitled "Finnish or Swedish as a second language" (Immigrant education in Finland). It is generally not so difficult for the youngsters to learn to basic proficiency in a new language, but acquiring the aca-

demic language and discourse required in different subjects in school is quite another matter (Mattila & Björklund 2013).

Although the URMs are motivated and hard-working, it is more difficult for them to succeed with their education than for students who have gone through the normal educational path since pre-school in Finland. There are other challenges than learning the language. Especially those minors, who have received insufficient education in their former home country often have learning difficulties and lack study skills. They often have experiences from an educational system very different from the Finnish. If the education methods have been very authoritarian, it takes extra time to learn to study independently and take responsibility (Aikuisten maahanmuuttajien perusopetus 2014).

There are many educational transition points where the risk to drop out is considerable. This risk is biggest for those over compulsory school age, as they must both learn Finnish and complete the basic syllabus within a couple of years, while Finnish children have nine years of comprehensive education in their mother tongue. It has been estimated that a young immigrant needs between five and seven years to acquire the necessary cognitive language skills for higher level studies. Basic communication skills are much easier to attain, even in less than a year. Insufficient skills in Finnish or Swedish form the biggest obstacle to secondary stage education and the most important reason for young immigrants dropping out according to research findings in Finland and Sweden (Osallisena Suomessa 2013; Backlund et al. 2012).

The 18th birthday brings many changes in the life of the unaccompanied minor. Reaching the age of majority means losing the representative and the right to family reunification. The minor must leave the family group home and live independently. The situation is not easy although support is provided. An independence promotion plan is drawn up well in time before coming of age. The availability of after care and support is very important at this stage, as the new situation can be quite chaotic. Everyday household must be managed from cooking meals to doing the laundry, and income and expenses must balance. The caretakers told of many problems which young people face in this stage of life. All youngsters moving away from home, not only immigrants, face the same problems, but URMs cannot turn to their parents in times of difficulty.

> *They might seem to get along fine, have neat clothes at school and so, but when you visit them you may see really strange things. They should have a mother who would visit them every now and then to clean and do their laundry. (Counsellor)*

The counsellors and social workers interviewed agreed that integration takes at least 10–20 years, even though the URMs learn independent living within a short period of time (Björklund 2014). There is very little research on the later lives of URMs. Most of the research has focused on the initial period in the new home country and on the best way to organize reception and after-care. Little attention has been paid to how their background, living without parents in a new culture in a vulnerable period of their lives, has affected their choices and life-trajectories (see Backlund et al. 2012).

Generally, the situation of immigrant youth on the labor market is difficult and the inactive share (not on the labor market or in education) of them has been much higher than for Finnish youth (Osallisena Suomessa 2013). The URMs are in the same situation as other youngsters with refugee background. Prejudice and discrimination are obstacles on the labor market. To compensate for this, they need good command of Finnish/Swedish and documented professional skills, persistence and also luck. A young woman revealed her resilience when telling about her hopes:

> *I hope to graduate soon, and my dream job is working as an accountant. I don't know if I will succeed in getting a job as accountant when I finally have vocational qualification in business and administration after one year and a half. Maybe I must continue to study at a university of applied sciences after that. Maybe I can work and study at the same time, because three-four years in school again is too much, and how would I finance it? It would be very hard, first three years here and then four years more, seven years. I can't make it that way. I look for work, and think about university studies then. (Woman, 21)*

The factors separating those who came as URMs on the labour market from other immigrants of the same age are initial vulnerability and resilience, no family present and a period of life in institutional settings, and a pressure to succeed, for many the

reason they were sent to seek asylum in the first place. Lowering the aspirations was a reality for most of the youngsters interviewed in the research project, but keeping up appearances was essential for all. In the words of a counsellor:

> *Nobody ever goes home or phones home and says "I have a difficult time in Europe. Life sucks, I can't make money and work is hard to come by". Everybody must say that life is a breeze and money keeps pouring in. Nobody can say (to the family) that it's not easy, it's hard, because then they have failed while others have succeeded. When they come here (to Finland) they think that all is fine, all goes well and all the doors are open. But it isn't like that at all.*

A Nordic Comparison

In the Nordic countries the discussion on asylum policies has often been linked to the welfare system. Although the links between immigration, integration and welfare state policies are strong in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, the countries have quite different approaches to immigration and integration, especially when it comes to refugees. A large proportion of the newcomers have proven difficult to integrate in the Nordic labour market, which is characterised by high demands for skills. Thus political support for immigration restrictions has increased in all four countries. General social policies are targeted at the overall population, and it also sometimes benefits immigrants to a higher extent than the majority, because many of them have a more precarious situation on the labour market. The Nordic countries have reacted by tightening the immigration policies, Sweden remaining the most generous and Denmark the most restrictive (Brochmann & Hagelund 2011).

The organizational and administrative systems for taking care of the URM differ between the countries. Finland has perhaps the most complicated system with many actors on many levels involved. Coordinating special units for minors at a national level and seeing to the children's' best interest has been challenging due to the polarization of administration. There have been difficulties in cooperation, and the duties of different authorities require clarification (Policies, practices... 2014).

Although all Nordic countries claim to base their politics concerning unaccompanied minors on the principle of the best interest of the child, migration control generally tends to overshadow it. The differences in discourse between the Nordic countries relate to the question of return and if this can be considered to be in the best interest of the child. The efforts to promote voluntary return and reintegration in the country of origin (or a third country) indicate compromising "best interests" in favour of migration control.

Conclusions

There are shortcomings in the reception and integration of refugee minors; fragmented organizational structures with insufficient cooperation, problems with placing URMs in municipalities which often are unwilling to receive them, difficulties in providing adequate language training, education and health care, following up adolescents coming of age with supporting measures, minors disappearing during the asylum procedure etc.

There is no single authority responsible for the welfare of the unaccompanied minors in any of the Nordic countries. The administrative structure needs to be simplified and/or cooperation between administrative sectors improved. The uneven supply of health care services, especially the access to mental and psychiatric care for the URMs should be remedied.

Primary and secondary education needs improving. In primary education the minors should receive sufficient preparatory education before being placed in an "ordinary" class and the size of heterogeneous classes should not be too big. Integration in school should be supported with teachers' cooperation. Support persons knowing the immigrant child's mother tongue should be employed in bigger schools. The children's own mother tongue should be supported.

Attention must be paid to those URMs beyond compulsory school age. They often finish comprehensive education with insufficient language skills and do not attain the same knowledge level as native minors.

Support should be provided also after the age of 18. The transition points on the educational path are especially critical for minors and targeted individual support is important. Also the transition from education to entering the labour market is critical, and different forms of publicly supported

entry jobs providing gates to the open labour market should be available.

Free-time activities should be encouraged, because it is one of the best ways to establish contacts between the native population and the young immigrants. NGOs and clubs should be encouraged to organize different kinds of activities (sports, cultural activities, hobbies etc.) involving young immigrants. Targeting municipal support to such efforts would be a powerful incentive.

Integration is a two-way process involving both immigrants and natives, and information to the majority population on a local level is important. Mentorship and international friend families have proven to be good practices.

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FinnForum XI –konferenssi järjestetään Turussa syksyllä 2016

Yhdysvaltain ja Kanadan suomalaissukuisella väestöllä on pitkät perinteet yhteisille kokoontumisille, joista tunnetuimpia ovat FinnFest, FinnForum ja Kanadan Grand Finn Fest -juhlat. Edellä mainituista FinnFest ja Finnish Canadian Grand Festival ovat painottuneet suomalaisen kulttuurin esittelyyn, FinnForum keskittyy lähinnä tieteelliseen puoleen.

Tämä kaksipäiväinen tieteellis- ja asiapainotteinen tapahtuma on suunnattu suomalaista sukujuurta oleville ja muillekin suomalaisuudesta kiinnostuneille. Tilaisuudet on järjestetty hieman vaihtelevin väliajoin tarkastelemaan eri näkökulmista ulkosuomalaisuutta, yhteyksiä Suomeen, suomalaisen kulttuurin muotoja ja siihen liittyviä käsityksiä. Kokoontumiset ovat olleet tieteellispainotteisia ja heijastaneet siten kulloinkin ajankohtaisia etnisyyteen, siirtolaisuuteen ja ulkosuomalaisuuteen liittyviä ajankohtaisia tutkimuskysymyksiä. Kokouksiin on osallistunut viime vuosina arviolta n. 100 asiantuntijaa ja muuta kiinnostunutta.

Turun yliopiston eri yksiköiden (erityisesti Yleisen historian oppiaineen) ja Siirtolaisuusinstituutin aloitteesta on tarkoitus järjestää Turussa syksyllä 2016 seuraava FinnForum. Mukana järjestelyissä on myös Åbo Akademi. Valmistelujen edetessä asiasta informoidaan laajemmin.

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