


FROM ACCOMPANIMENT TO ABANDONMENT: UNACCOMPANIED MIGRANT MINORS AND ADOLESCENTS IN ANDALUSIA (SPAIN)

*Do acompanhamento ao abandono:
menores e adolescentes migrantes desacompanhados na Andaluzia (Espanha)*

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Abstract

The following article aims to analyse how minors and young people who carry out their migration projects accompanied by their parents end up immersed in the protection systems of the region of Andalusia (Spain). After conducting 62 interviews with people who have experienced a migration project, the article focuses on the processes of abandonment between minors and families. The results expose the personal conflicts that are experienced during migratory mourning, institutional reception in child protection centres, and the processes of social inclusion/exclusion in the host society. It is shown that family accompaniment is carried out with the aim of providing protection throughout the migration process up to the destination.

Keywords: abandonment; foreign minors; family project; international protection; reception centres.

Resumo

O artigo a seguir tem como objetivo analisar como os menores e os jovens que realizam seus projetos de migração acompanhados pelos pais acabam imersos nos sistemas de proteção da região da Andaluzia (Espanha). Depois de realizar 62 entrevistas com pessoas que passaram por um projeto de migração, o artigo se concentra nos processos de abandono entre menores e famílias. Os resultados expõem os conflitos em nível pessoal vivenciados durante o luto migratório, a recepção institucional em centros de proteção à criança e os processos de inclusão/exclusão social na sociedade de acolhimento. É demonstrado que o acompanhamento familiar é realizado com o objetivo de oferecer proteção durante todo o processo de migração até o destino.

Palavras-chave: abandono; menores estrangeiros; projeto familiar; proteção; centros de recepção.

Introduction

The following paper focuses on the study of the migration of minors and adolescents who arrive in the region of Andalusia (Spain) accompanied by at least one family member. From an ethnographic perspective of an exploratory nature, the article analyses how the subjects of study, starting from a family-based migration project, finally end up integrated into the Child Protection Systems. These are circumstances of abandonment in which families accompany their children to a safe place with the intention that the children end up being declared unaccompanied and integrated into protection centres. The interest in these actions stems from the situation of vulnerability and poverty in the family environment (Gutiérrez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2024). In this context, two situations stand out: on the one hand, the accompaniment of minors and adolescents to the destination place to subsequently place the person in a reception centre and return to the country of origin and, on the other hand, families who, after arriving in Spain and receiving aid from social care programmes of various social entities and after trying, subsequently, to get ahead independently, must separate from their children so that they can live in better social and training conditions in minors' centres.

In recent decades, many researchers have developed their studies on unaccompanied foreign minors, i.e. those who have independently carried out a migration project (Bailleul and Senovilla, 2015). In this context, a large volume of scientific research dating back to the 1990s has addressed the situation from various Spanish and European regions (Torrado, Cáceres, 2021; Quiroga *et al.*, 2010). All of this is to the detriment of studies that analyse other existing migratory projects that incorporate a family component as a protective factor and that, in the same way, present situations of social vulnerability (Gimeno-Monterde, Mendoza, 2024) as observed in recent human displacements caused by conditions of armed conflict and poverty (Villareal and Bernal, 2024). Historically, these movements have been neither constant nor uniform. The economic crisis of 2007, or the health crisis caused by COVID-19 in 2020, has had an impact on migration processes (Bajo-Marcos *et al.*, 2024). Looking at the most recent data, in 2023, a total of 5,151 minors arrived in Spain, 116.8% more than the previous year (Ministerio del Interior, 2023). Among the Spanish regions with the greatest migratory impact are the Canary Islands, Andalusia and Melilla. Looking specifically at the area of Andalusia, the most recent research has addressed issues studying the situation of protection centres (Gómez-Vicario, Gutiérrez-Sánchez, 2023), social inclusion (Rodríguez-Ventosa *et al.*, 2024), social intervention (Derluyn, 2018; Gómez-Vicario *et al.*, 2023; López-Ulla *et al.*, 2023), and transition to adulthood programmes (Gutiérrez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2023; López-Lajusticia, 2024). Even so, the study of the situation of minors and adolescents who have been abandoned by their parents in Spain and Andalusia from the standpoint of this research has not had a notable academic impact, above all, due to the difficulty in accessing data on minors and young people who live in shelters and protection centres (Abolafio, Herrera, 2022), those who abandon resources, or those who once in Spain and have been cared for by social institutions, return to centres that once cared for them (Estrada, Palma, 2018). In this regard, public administrations do not offer updated data that could serve as guidance for professionals working with these minors and adolescents, which makes it difficult to harmonise figures that correspond to data provided by social entities (Jiménez, 2022).

Minors and adolescents mainly face the impossibility of carrying out their migration projects through safe and legal channels (Arce, 2018). Therefore, family accompaniment to their destination, whether through safe or legal channels or those understood as irregular (jumping fences, arriving

by boat, among others), is crucial to achieving the planned objectives. In the case of girls, these involve even more complexities than in the case of boys. Exploitation and trafficking networks have a greater impact on them. Therefore, family accompaniment is vital, although it does not eliminate the probability of falling into this type of mafia network (Torrado, Ceballos, 2023). At the same time, it is possible to find evidence of migration projects that involve entire families, i.e. some cases go beyond the accompaniment of the minor (Allsopp, Chase, 2019). It could be said that the migration project encompasses three key processes: leaving the context of origin, crossing borders and arriving at the destination (Epelde, 2017; Quiroga, Chagas, 2021). In terms of arriving at the destination, in the case of minors and adolescents accompanied by a family member and based on a verification of kinship, they are sent together to stays run by public or private organisations so that they remain together and, therefore, do not lose their accompaniment and family ties. There are reception programmes run by non-governmental organisations that maintain family relations and accompany people in the process of obtaining authorisation to stay in Spain (Gómez-Vicario, Gutiérrez-Sánchez, 2023). In those cases, in which the person supposedly accompanying the minor does not have family ties and, therefore, lacks justification for the accompaniment, there is the possibility of being expelled from the country or incurring crimes of human trafficking or illegal immigration. Minors and adolescents are doubly protected by legislation due to their status as minors regardless of their origin and due to their situation regulated by the regulations on foreigners (Derluyn *et al.*, 2009).

Article 148.1 of the Spanish Constitution establishes that Autonomous Communities are responsible for social assistance. The reception and protection centres for minors offer an alternative to poverty for many families, although, as has been observed in various research studies, the social inclusion of these young people is sometimes influenced by disputes with the societies where these protection systems are inserted (Gimeno-Monterde, Gutiérrez-Sánchez, 2019). In protection centres, there are professional staff that provide comprehensive care to minors and adolescents (mainly social workers, social educators and psychologists). These actions are coordinated to develop individual and collective care projects (Kanics *et al.*, 2010; Kohli, 2009; McDonald, 2016). One of the relevant aspects of the care process is the maintenance of contact with families as long as these ties exist or persist. In this sense, Vacchiano (2014) conveys the relevance of continued contact to people's emotional stability. In addition, these contacts serve as connectors and even send remittances back home. In short, the migration project does not end with the entry into the host resources; rather, in some cases, it can last over time. In fact, the legislative change that took place in October 2021 in Spain allows young migrants to work in Spain by means of Royal Decree 903/2021, thus favouring their social inclusion and stability (Gutiérrez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, a relevant issue in the lives of minors and adolescents that has been studied extensively has been the feeling of loss or grief. Grief corresponds to the reaction of subjects to a loss, which can be related to a person or relevant aspects, such as, following this study, the country of origin. Achotegui (2021) expresses how grief harbours particular peculiarities related to the personality of the person and the culture of origin, as well as aspects such as family, language, status, land, and security. Migration processes can have consequences on mental health, where psychological distress, post-traumatic reactions, stress and a high degree of vulnerability can be evidenced (Palacín-Bartroli *et al.*, 2023), and the longer it extends over time, the greater the risks of chronicity. In short, the migration of unaccompanied minors is considered a global problem (Lekkai 2020), which impacts their capacity for emotional adaptation and well-being and generates changes that are sometimes

difficult to bear, where existing difficulties in the host societies are combined with problems related to prejudices and stereotypes (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2023; Cheddadi, 2020; Blanco, 2001).

Although the article studies the situation of migrant minors and adolescents, it takes as a reference young people and adults who went through abandonment processes. Due to the difficulty in accessing information on minors, the study considered people who had experienced the migration process from the perspective of family abandonment but once they had left child protection centres. The researcher did not have permission to conduct interviews in the protection centres. However, the study analyses the situation from the point of view of minors, i.e. people under 18 years of age. The structure of the text is as follows: the theoretical arguments on childhood and adolescence and their relationship with abandonment and child protection systems are presented. This theory is followed by the methodological considerations employed in the study, which was based on a qualitative analysis. Next, the results are presented, where it is possible to observe various interview extracts, which enrich the study by visualising the participants' voices. Finally, the main conclusions of the study and bibliographical references are shown.

Methodology

The main objective of this study is to analyse how minors and adolescent people who carry out their migration projects accompanied by their parents (fathers, mothers or legal guardians) end up immersed in the child protection systems of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia (Spain). The research focuses on the population that has experienced a family migration project and who, for various reasons, have become involved in child protection systems. The study was carried out between June 2023 and June 2024.

Population

The research, in its data collection process, conducted a number of semi-structured interviews with young people (n=62) in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia. The interviews were conducted with men and women between 18 and 35 years of age. Due to the impossibility of conducting interviews in the child protection centres themselves, the study took as a reference the experience of people who had gone through processes of bereavement, abandonment and family migration. Table 1 shows the list of participants by province.

Table 1 - Research participants by province

Provinces	Age ranges				Gender	
	18-20 years	20-25 years	25-30 years	30-35 years	Men	Women
Almería	3	2	2	1	5	3
Cádiz	4	3	*	1	3	5
Córdoba	1	3	5	2	7	4
Granada	5	2	*	1	6	2
Huelva	1	*	3	2	6	*
Jaén	*	3	1	4	8	*
Málaga	3	4	1	1	7	2
Sevilla	1	1	2	*	3	1

Source: own elaboration

Of the total number of young people, 17 women participated in the study (27.4%). In the first instance, 86 young people were contacted, of whom 62 were finally included. The contact with the participants was based on linked or 'snowball' contacts from the interviewers. Based on the field experience of the study's main researcher and the contacts made over the years with the migrant population, the study had access to the participants through close contacts and then had access to more people.

Before the interviews were conducted, the participants were informed in advance about the anonymous treatment of the data with regard to ethical considerations. In the case of the men, all of them were engaged in agriculture except for seven, who worked in the hotel and catering industry. Fifty per cent of the women worked in agriculture, and the other fifty per cent worked as domestic workers assisting older people.

Procedure and data analysis

The research carried out semi-structured interviews in the eight Andalusian provinces with the aim of gaining first-hand knowledge of the experiences of migration projects with family ties. The interviews consisted of fifteen questions divided into two blocks. On the one hand, block 1 contained aspects related to the migration project (route, knowledge or not of the admission to a centre, family relationships, mourning) and, on the other hand, block 2 contained aspects related to social inclusion (situation in the centres, social and labour inclusion). This qualitative methodological tool was chosen in this study because it is an instrument where it is possible to construct a discourse that is mainly stated by the interviewee but which is based on the interventions of the interviewer, which provides logic and meaning to the technique itself (Alonso, 1994). The data obtained from the research were analysed and classified using the N-Vivo version 10 software for Mac.

Finally, as for the profiles of the interviewees, all were of Moroccan nationality and were accompanied by at least one family member in the migration project. In this study, only participants of this nationality participated, mainly due to the proximity to Spain. No cases of other nationalities were identified that had experienced processes of family abandonment, as described in this research. The proximity to the European continent allows people accompanying their children to return home without having to undergo a new migration process.

The interviews were conducted in parks or cafés, taking into account the availability of the respondents and their work obligations. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Spanish; it was not necessary to request interpreters.

Results

The results are presented following the order of the questions asked in the interviews, where, in the first block, aspects of the migration process were dealt with. In the second block, issues related to social inclusion were discussed. Part of the most relevant results extracted from the research are shown.

Migration process and vulnerability

With regard to the first block of questions and the mode of arrival in the region of Andalusia, it should be noted that in all cases, interviewees stated that they were minors. In 60% of the cases (n=37), they arrived accompanied by at least one family member and by sea (in some cases

plastic boats). Only two cases were documented of being accompanied by both mother and father. Twenty per cent through the so-called legal channels (n=12) and the challenge to swim between Morocco and Ceuta and then be sent to Andalusia (n=13).

In some cases, interviewees start from complex situations related to poverty and vulnerability. Most of them state that they live in families with several members (between 3 and 5 siblings), which in many cases leads to having to leave school early, start a trade and help relatives care for younger siblings. The parental approach of accompanying and abandoning minors and adolescents in Spain is based on a family project that has an economic origin and social vulnerability.

I was 10 years old at the time. We left Morocco by boat. I remember perfectly well how bad it was; it was summer, and it was very hot. I remember that we went on three ships, but in the end, only two arrived. (Interview N° 10, Male, 19 years old, Cádiz)

My family never told me about the idea of leaving me in a centre for minors. That hurt me a lot. I was 15 years old at the time. Today, after I got back in touch with my family, I understood that my mother was doing it for my good. (Interview N° 20, Woman, 23 years old, Seville)

Approximately 70% to 80% of the children did not know that their loved ones' ultimate intention was to take them to a child protection centre. The remaining 20% of people interviewed were in situations of normalised accompaniment, but for reasons related to daily difficulties, the minors were sent to protection centres as a measure agreed upon by family members and themselves. Situations of poverty and the inability to have a normalised life compared to the situation in the country of origin force families to initiate these separation processes, which, naturally, cause complex moments at an internal level.

I was well aware of the situation at home. There were many siblings, and the problem was really poor. I said yes as soon as my father told me to go to a centre, but it was not easy for me to make the decision. There were several days when I had to digest the information. (Interview N° 20, Woman, 23 years old, Seville)

An interesting aspect that emerges from the results is that which has to do with trafficking in human beings. Of the cases we observed, two women stated that according to what their relatives had told them, travelling accompanied was the most reliable way to reduce the probability of not falling into exploitation networks. We can show how family protection is maintained throughout the migration project.

My mother told me in Tangiers that she would accompany me to Spain and then she would go back. Apparently, a neighbour never showed up, which generated a lot of fear. We were very poor, and one of the alternatives we had was for me to go to Spain. My mother saved for years to be able to get ferry tickets. Thanks to her, today I have a good job, and I can send money home. (Interview N° 25, Female, 22 years old, Granada)

The results show the complex situations that the interviewees had to go through to understand their situations of vulnerability, which especially affected their mental health. In certain cases, feelings of abandonment and mourning are detected, and in others, problems that affect social relations, food or generated insecurities.

I was very affected by arriving in Spain and not being able to feel accompanied by my parents at all times. I didn't speak for a month. I remember how the social workers helped me a lot. Some of them knew Arabic and French. Since then, I have found it difficult to establish trust with people; I think they are going to betray me. (Interview N° 20, Woman, 23 years old, Seville)

From the above extract, it is possible to argue that professional intervention is very important in cases of migration. Moreover, situations of abandonment in some cases lead to violent behaviour on the part of the children. These are expressions of frustration that, with professional help, can be treated and, therefore, stabilised. In short, they are frustrated expressions caused by separation grief.

An interesting question is how families suffer from problems caused by the deterioration of abandonment, i.e. feelings of betrayal can have a negative impact and can be sustained over time.

My family and I took a long time to get back in touch. I didn't want anything to do with them; they had betrayed me. (Interview Nº 62, Male, 35 years old, Malaga)

On the contrary, cases were observed in the interviews in which families experienced situations of mistreatment and violence that their parents or siblings carried out.

My mother and I decided to run away from home in Rabat, all in secret. My father was crazy and beat us every day. My brother left home. When my brother left, my father got angry. This situation made my mother and I go one day while my father was taking a nap. I had no problem living in a centre in Spain; I wanted to escape from that hell. (Interview Nº 9, Female, 28 years old, Granada)

Social inclusion: Perspectives from and outside protection centres

The second block of questions related to social inclusion raises relevant issues such as the following.

According to the interviewees, the initial processes in a children's centre are a complex task. Lack of knowledge of the language, different schedules (in terms of food and sleeping hours) and fear of eating non-Halal food were issues that mattered to the people interviewed. In cases where minors were in contact with other Moroccans, coexistence and reception were quicker. However, each person had to be recognised by the group and behave well in terms of professional care, i.e., behave well and adapt quickly to the rules.

The situation in the centres is disparate. There are interviews where the habitability of the buildings was reported to be very poor and others, however, where the conditions were standardised. With regard to the extracts observed, it is striking to find centres with conditions classified as poor and those where the opposite is true. These issues show us how the demands of professionals and the management of the centres are vital for maintaining minimum standards of habitability for minors, in addition to the educational value of having everything clean and tidy.

My centre was pitiful. I swear that my house in Morocco was better, but we were very poor. Everything was dirty, there were leaks in winter, and we were cold. Fortunately, the food was good, although the portions were a bit small. After a while, they sent me to Seville to another centre, where I was fine. (Interview Nº 20, Woman, 23 years old, Seville)

With regard to social inclusion, interesting issues can be observed. On the one hand, those related to relations with the community (neighbourhood, villages, among other places) and those related to the training received by minors and young people in reception and protection centres. In relation to the former, there were cases in which the location of the centres was an issue that generated tensions with neighbours or towns where the centres were established. The creation of hoaxes and harmful stereotypes about who was going to live in these centres generated controversy and constant impediments to trying to include children in society socially. In terms of preparation

for life in care or independent living, interviewees point out how being 18 does not make you an autonomous person, and, as a foreigner, it isn't easy to find work or live in decent conditions. However, the existence of +18 programmes in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia helped to improve the situation after living in reception centres.

When I left the centre, I was lucky. I was helped by a family who were friends with the director of the centre. My director spoke very highly of me and said that I liked to study. This family gave me a room and fed me. For me, they are my family in Spain. Without them, I would have been on the street like many of my classmates. It's a pity that overnight everything changes. (Interview Nº 6, Male, 22 years old, Cádiz)

Let's look at questions related to employment. Most young people say that agriculture and the hotel and catering industry are the sectors that offer them the most work, with home care for older people being the sector that is most frequently repeated in the case of girls. In terms of family relations and the migration project, having a job allows young people to send money back home through remittances. In some cases, these amounts are small, especially in the early stages of work, as they have to share housing and take on individual responsibilities. Family relationships that had previously deteriorated become looser as young people begin to show signs of achieving the migration goals initiated by their families.

Whenever I could, I sent money home. I didn't have a good relationship with my family. There are months when I have been able to send 10€, others 50€ and others 100€. It all depends on how things are going. Life in Huelva is expensive, and I live in a village. (Interview Nº 7, Male, 29 years old, Huelva)

Finally, with regard to returning to the country of origin, all of the interviewees expressed their intentions to remain in Spain, at least for the next few years. They are committed to projects to stay in Europe that can provide them with sufficient economic assets to, over the years, return to their country of origin and start new businesses or start a family.

Conclusions

The results obtained in this research show how foreign minors and adolescents people end up immersed in child protection systems in Andalusia (Spain) despite having initiated a family migration project. The interviews have made it possible to study the perception of migrants who, on occasion unaware of the intentions of their family mobility, experience processes of grief and psychological instability due to separation. This situation is in line with previous research, such as that of Gutiérrez *et al.* (2024), where alternative migration projects and family studies, such as that of Gimeno-Monterde and Mendoza (2024) where it is possible to identify different family dynamics. The article presents cases where alternative migration projects to the traditional dynamics in which minors and young people travel alone are evident. However, regardless of how the journeys are made (accompanied or unaccompanied), the interviewees end up in reception and protection centres.

The results show how the levels of stress and grief due to separation are increased in the absence of the family context. However, some children are aware of the intentions of the migration project and pass through reception centres with relative safety, just like those who undertook the journey autonomously. After a process of border transit in which different routes coexist, families usually accompany their children, above all, with the aim of offering protection in the face of any problems that may arise. The accompaniment process is more intense in the case of girls, who are more likely and at greater risk of being recruited by mafia organisations that use human trafficking.

In the same way as the rest of the Moroccan compatriots, children live in unstable conditions, sometimes due to the habitability of the centres (places that require renovation, are not adapted to inclement weather, among others), relations with professionals (due to lack of understanding caused by communication problems) or problems of social insertion (due to lack of social inclusion plans or programmes). This issue is aggravated mainly if there are cases in which minors express concerns related to how to carry out their family pilgrimage to their destination (Estrada, Palma, 2018). This issue can lead to the deterioration of family ties or children being permanently separated from the family context. However, there are cases in which interviewees maintain that, as a result of maturity, they end up resuming relations with their relatives and even sending remittances when they get a job (once they have received several paychecks until they adapt to independent life).

In short, there is a need to improve the conditions and possibilities of finding a job. This issue is relevant given that, in most cases, young people end up working in sectors such as agriculture and the hotel and catering trade. As suggested measures, it would be necessary to improve existing resources so that the transition to adulthood has better social coverage, especially in terms of employment and mental health care.

With a view to future research, this study proposes to delve deeper into those migratory projects that are not so frequent and that generate processes of exclusion and high levels of social care. Future studies could continue to study the methods of family separation, migratory mourning, and mental health care.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this article

Data Availability

Research data is available in the body of the article

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