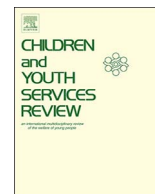




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Sexual abuse and exploitation of unaccompanied migrant children in Greece: Identifying risk factors and gaps in services during the European migration crisis

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores sexual abuse and exploitation of unaccompanied migrant children in Greece, and the risk factors associated with their occurrence. This study was conducted in Greece during 2016, at a time when inadequate official response to the ongoing migration crisis, including to the large number of unaccompanied child arrivals, led to a dire child protection crisis. Twenty-four in depth interviews were conducted with key informants in four of the main migrant hosting localities in Greece. The qualitative data reveal a series of institutional, legislative and individual factors that routinely expose unaccompanied children to sexual abuse and exploitation. The absence of safe and legal paths to appropriate migration destinations, the impossibility of returning home to oppressive and harmful environments and the daily exposure to unsatisfactory, sometimes inhumane, living conditions inside migrant facilities, are the main factors that drive unaccompanied migrant children toward sexual exploitation. The study also catalogs a series of significant gaps in both government and non-government responses. Among the most important are the absence of an integrated child protection system that spans national and local jurisdictions, the failure of existing child welfare systems to classify unaccompanied migrant children as a distinct and unique population requiring immediate attention and care irrespective of migration status, and the lack of properly trained and qualified staff to work with this uniquely vulnerable population. The study concludes that the current situation is evidence not of a migration crisis per se, but of a crisis in child protection.

1. Introduction

In spite of the significant progress made in the fields of health and human rights, the world continues to struggle to prevent increasingly severe and sustained humanitarian crises. Precipitated by complex and intertwined political, economic, societal, and more frequently, natural disasters (Delaney, 2006), these humanitarian emergencies disrupt critical economic systems, undermine routine protective mechanisms, vitiate family and societal dynamics, and exacerbate violence, abuse and insecurity (IPCCPE, 2006). Consequently, children's inherent vulnerability and dependency on others for protection and care places children caught up in humanitarian crises in uniquely dangerous positions, directly exposed to extreme risk of physical, sexual and psychological harm, as well as heightened risk for exploitation, neglect and abuse (O' Leary & Squire, 2012). In recent years, the plight of children at risk has grown in visibility, evidenced by the active public and policy discourse on child protection, widely ratified international instruments upholding children's rights (Convention on the Rights of the Child,

United Nations, 1989; Global Compact on Children, forthcoming), rapid response and systematic mobilization of international aid organizations (see Unicef, 2006; Save the Children, 2007; ICRC, 2014 and others), and the increase in funding allocated to children at risk. However, and in spite of recent advances, society continues to struggle with the lack of a coherent approach to the protection of its children (O' Leary & Squire, 2012), greatly jeopardizing their protection, health, safety and well-being.

The phenomenon of child sexual abuse and exploitation poses a unique set of challenges to humanitarian communities, aid organizations and governments, particularly during humanitarian emergencies. Hard to define and difficult to identify, the phenomenon often goes undetected, leaving its victims hidden in plain sight, unidentified and unprotected (Levine & Bowden, 2002). The definitions of the terms "child sexual abuse" and "child sexual exploitation" themselves leave ample room for interpretation and debate, hindering prevention efforts. Child sexual abuse, for instance, is defined as "actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, including inappropriate touching,

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by force or under unequal or coercive conditions”, while child sexual exploitation, on the other hand, is defined as “any abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes; this includes profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (Committee, 2002). These broad definitions encompass many of the exploitive and abusive practices children face during humanitarian crises, including child marriage, child sex trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation and pornography (Department for Education, 2017). Failure to safeguard and protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation leads to a plethora of short and long-term adverse consequences on the physical and psychological wellbeing of victims (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009; Hossain, Zimmerman, Abas, Light, & Watts, 2010). Child victims face substantial difficulties healing and integrating as a result of deep feelings of shame, ostracism by their local communities and social stigmatization (ECPAT, 2006).

Migrant children in transit through irregular paths of migration face a heightened risk of sexual abuse and exploitation as a result of “the legal production of migrant ‘illegality’ ” (De Genova, 2002:429), precipitated by adverse migration and asylum policies that erode their status as children (O’Connell Davidson, 2011). As dominant modern discourse constructs “migrants” as a threat, while viewing “children” as inherently innocent and vulnerable, defining someone as a “migrant child” creates an ambivalence (Bhabha, 2014) and a fundamental conflict between two opposing and incongruous discourses (O’Connell Davidson, 2011). As a result, migrant children in transit countries find themselves trapped between the world’s duty to protect them as children, and the strict migration and asylum policies imposed on them as migrants. The conflict between discourses allows for the substitution of a migrant child’s status as a child by that of an illegal migrant, further reinforcing punitive rather than protective migration and asylum practices. An example is the immediate and protracted institutionalization that migrant children are subjected to, a situation that hinders their access to quality care and education, and directly affects their resilience and coping strategies. Left in a no man’s land of illegality and vulnerability, migrant children, particularly those who are unaccompanied or separated, easily fall victim to sexual abuse and exploitation and other atrocities.¹

The ongoing mass displacement of millions fleeing war and conflict and seeking refuge in Europe has placed the spotlight directly on this nexus between migration and child sexual exploitation (Unicef, 2017, 2017b, 2016). A growing number of international aid organizations (ECPAT International, 2013; Lanzarote Committee, 2017; Save the Children, 2016; UNHCR, 2012; UNICEF, 2009, 2017) have begun to sound the alarm, exposing the scale and acceleration of the phenomenon.

The current study explores the complex set of factors that lead to the perpetuation of the phenomenon, in the context of children on the move in Greece, a critical site as the main entry point to Europe and the first European transit country for hundreds of thousands migrant children.

2. Background: The case of Greece

Since early 2015, Greece has been at the forefront of a conflict-driven exodus with origins in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, where recently exacerbated longstanding economic and humanitarian migrations have, resulting in a mass displacement toward Europe of historic proportions. It is estimated that by the end of 2017, 1,550,132 million people entered Europe seeking asylum and protection. Of these, 1,059,891 entered through Greece (UNHCR, 2017). In 2016, European

countries along the “Balkan route of migration”, which encompasses Central and Northern European countries, began to seal their borders and introduced extreme measures to halt the flow of migrants through their territories, placing at the forefront of European politics contestation about borders and national sovereignty. Employing this rhetoric to bolster and justify anti-immigration policies within Europe, many European countries claim to have created “safe zones” for their citizens (Harrer, 2017), while successfully outsourcing responsibility to provide humanitarian aid to external countries on the front lines, such as Italy and Greece.

Two years into this humanitarian crisis, more than 62,000 migrants remain stranded in Greece, dependent on political will and policy reform for a chance to continue their lives and begin the long process of recovery (UNHCR, 2017). It is estimated that among those currently stranded, 17,950 are accompanied children (UNICEF, 2016, 2017c) and 3350 are unaccompanied children (EKKA, 2017). However, the actual number of unaccompanied children currently stranded in Greece is likely much larger, in part due to the inability of state actors to carry out accurate assessments of age.² 94% of unaccompanied children currently in Greece are boys, with 92% of these aged 14 or older. The majority originate from countries of the Middle East, particularly Pakistan (39%), Afghanistan (21%) and Syria (14%) (EKKA, 2017).

As anti-immigration policies began to erode international protection standards and asylum practices in the region, Greece witnessed first hand their impact on the migrant population. Simultaneously struggling with the worst financial crisis of its modern history and an unprecedented arrival of destitute refugees and migrants, the country has been unable to allocate the resources necessary to effectively respond to this crisis. The double crisis has led to a situation where national asylum practices and child protection systems are overstretched, underfunded and ineffective. The severe lack of appropriate, specialized facilities and shelters has left unaccompanied children in state custody, detained in police stations, or stranded in temporary facilities sharing living quarters with an adult migrant population (EKKA, 2017). An overall lack of proper housing, access to health care, and limited basic needs provision exacerbates an already precarious condition, and poses a direct threat to the wellbeing of migrant children in general, with overarching implications for the protection and care of unaccompanied children in particular. As a result, migrant children are left unprotected, unidentified and forced to rely on self-initiated measures to survive, inevitably leading to increased cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Through its findings, the study aims to contribute to the development of targeted and systematic policies and interventions designed to enhance the protection available to migrant children, to ensure they are considered children first and foremost, and to counteract factors responsible for their sexual abuse and exploitation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The research design consisted of two phases. During the first phase, a thorough literature review of the current situation in Greece was conducted, including documentation of violence, abuse and exploitation within migrant camps. During the second phase, semi-structured interviews with key informants were conducted exploring four central themes: risk factors that render children susceptible to sexual abuse and exploitation; gaps in the Greek child protection and welfare systems that contribute to children’s increased vulnerability; cases of sexual

¹ The authors use the term unaccompanied migrant child, in compliance with article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989 (CRC), to define those migrant children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives, while migrating, or they are migrating alone without being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for their wellbeing.

² While one dimensional physical tests such as dental x-rays have long been discredited as reliable tools for assessing age, Greek authorities continue to rely on them results in error and the frequent labeling of child migrants as adults, with the adverse protection consequences that ensue (Bhabha et al., 2016).

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