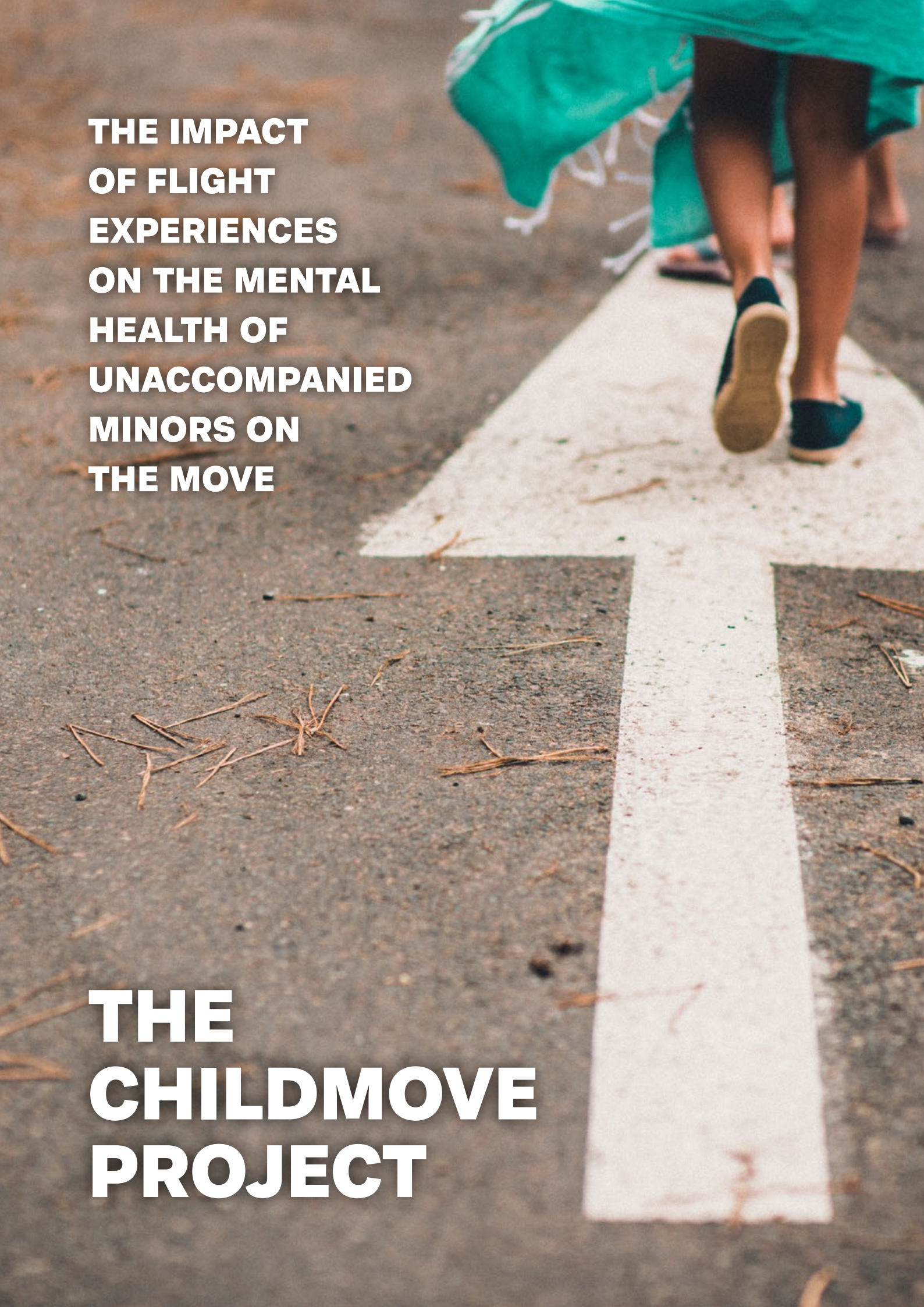

THE IMPACT OF FLIGHT EXPERIENCES ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS ON THE MOVE

THE CHILDMOVE PROJECT

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GHENT UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, over 35 million children are currently forcibly displaced, of which a considerable group is separated from their parent(s) or caregiver(s), unaccompanied minors (UMs)[2]. Europe is no exception: in fact, the numbers of unaccompanied migrant minors who entered the EU doubled between 2013 and 2014, to then quadruple by 2015[3]. These figures are now also severely impacted by the Ukraine war, as children are among the main groups of refugees who left the country[4]. Due to their minor age and the lack of parental presence, this migrant population is highly vulnerable, and it is thus subjected to specific protection systems[5]. Yet, regardless of these legal and procedural frameworks, young unaccompanied migrants moving towards and inside of Europe are *de facto* exposed to severe hardship[6].

As reported in the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, children constitute an increasingly relevant migrant population with particular needs and rights[7]. Because of the harsh living conditions these children are often escaping from, and the extremely tough experiences they go through while on the move, such migration considerably impacts UMs' psychological wellbeing. Frequently, this (forced) mobility leads to elevated levels of emotional problems. The severe consequences of the difficulties UMs face before migrating are compounded by the suffering they often experience in the countries of transit and destination. These stressful events include daily material (e.g., limited housing facilities) and daily social stressors (e.g., limited social network, experiencing racism), or the limited professional support UMs often receive.

By presenting the main results of the European Research Council (ERC) funded ChildMove project[8] - a longitudinal study of UMs' migration trajectories to and in Europe, this report provides evidence on UMs' flight experiences outside as well as inside the EU, and the effects this mobility has on young migrants' psychological wellbeing. In particular, the report discusses the main outcomes of the study and related recommendations for policy makers and practitioners. These recommendations are structures in distince "policy briefs", adressing the major themes that came out of the entire ChildMove study, and that we, as researchers, thought to being relevant for the diverse stakeholders working with and support these young newcomers in the European context.

This report presents only some of the main study findings; for an overview of all study findings, we refer the reader to the project's publications and dissemination outlets, which can also be found on the ChildMove website (*www.childmove.eu*).

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

Although UMs' trajectories are often fragmented and multi-directional[9], we have organized the diverse themes along a somehow 'linear' geography which follows minors' journeys from outside to inside the EU. As such, we begin by presenting UMs' experiences in a key transit country, Libya. Next, we concentrate on the experiences of violence that UMs go through when attempting to cross Europe's external and internal frontiers, as we discuss data related to a variety of *borderzones* located along the so-called 'Central and Eastern Mediterranean Routes'[10].

The report goes on by discussing the implications of the detention of UMs in Greece. In the next section, we expose the living conditions of female migrants trafficked to Italy, and the experiences they have both inside and outside formal reception and protection systems. Keeping the focus on the Italian context, the report continues by providing insights on the reasons why many UMs do not stay in the first country of arrival in Europe, but rather continue their mobility within the EU, the so-called 'secondary movements'. Finally, in the last two briefs, we offer first a view on the frequent experience of discrimination and racism migrant minors face when settling in different European countries. Second, the report ends by discussing how different reception models can impact UMs' psychological wellbeing; the focus of this section is mainly on Belgium.

Each of the chapter ends with a 'sketch', visualizing and illustrating the main findings of that policy brief. Participants' stories are then not only narrated in words, but also reflected in strong images.

METHODOLOGY

The ChildMove project investigated the impact of flight experiences on the mental health of unaccompanied minors moving through and settling in Europe. Forced migration is known to drastically increase symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder[11]. Both stressful life events before and during the journey and post-migration stressors, such as daily material and social stressors, and inadequate professional support have an impact on UMs' wellbeing. Yet, little is known about the longitudinal psychological effect of UMs' experiences during the flight.

The **overall objective** of the ChildMove study was to increase the knowledge about the impact of transit experiences on the psychological wellbeing of UMs, in relation to past stressful life events and current daily stressors.

The following **research questions** guided the study:

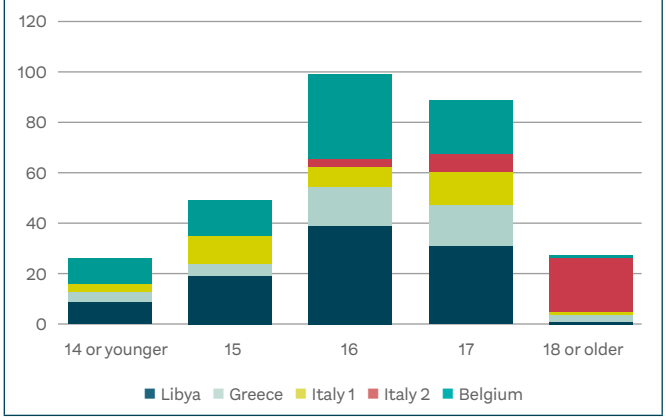
- What experiences do unaccompanied refugee minors have while fleeing from their home country to the country of settlement?
- What is the impact of these flight experiences on their psychological wellbeing, with particular attention to the impact of experiences of racism and the impact of detention/reception conditions in transit countries?
- Can we differentiate the psychological impact of flight experiences from the impact of past traumatic stressors (home country) and current daily stressors (host country)? What is a possible theoretical alternative?
- Which types of care and support systems for URMs in both transit and settlement countries have a beneficial impact on their psychological wellbeing?

STUDY DESIGN

This project used a highly innovative methodology, combining different approaches in a mixed-methods and multi-sited, cross-country and longitudinal design. Apart from Libya where research participants were approached only once (cross-sectional study), data relative to the Italian, Greek and Belgian contexts were collected at three different measurement moments over a period of two years. Ethical reasons – i.e., to avoid becoming an incentive for young migrants to continue a highly dangerous journey – motivated the decision not to include follow-up interviews for the Libyan sample.

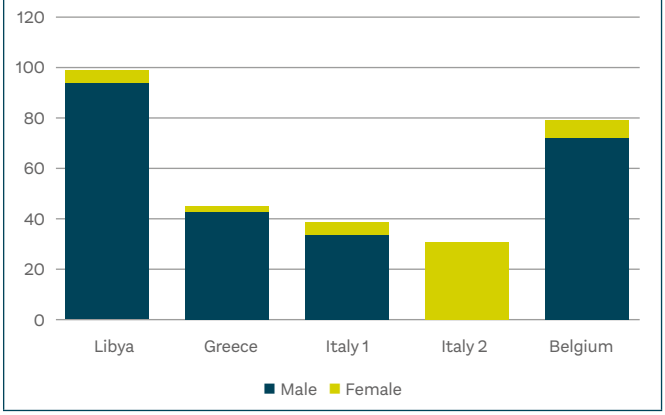
This research is thus made up of interlinked studies starting from four different countries: ***Libya***, ***Greece***, and ***Italy*** as key transit countries and main countries of entry in the European Union, and ***Belgium*** as an example of a settlement country for UMs. In each of

FIGURE 1: Age of the participants at recruitment



Note. Italy 1 refers to the sample of unaccompanied minors recruited in Italy; Italy 2 refers to the sample of young, female Nigerian victims of trafficking recruited in Italy.

FIGURE 2: Gender of the participants



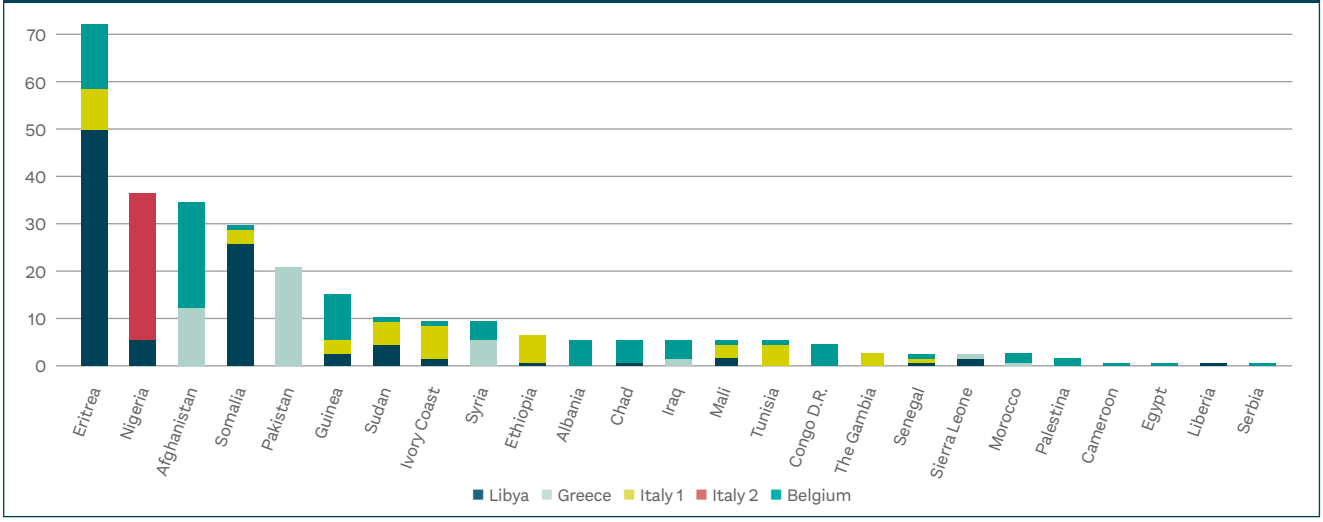
Note. Italy 1 refers to the sample of unaccompanied minors recruited in Italy; Italy 2 refers to the sample of young, female Nigerian victims of trafficking recruited in Italy.

these countries, diverse settings have been selected to to start the study and to select participants to include in the sample.

292 young people were interviewed on their past, present and future experiences, projects and aspirations, and they also completed translated self-reported questionnaires on wellbeing and mental health, experienced stressors, coping strategies and social support. Research participants were all over 14 years of age. In the four countries, participants were purposively sampled based on age, nationality and gender in order to reflect the composition of the group of unaccompanied minors in that particular country. Additionally, we included an extra sample of young, female Nigerian victims of trafficking who were selected in Italy and then also followed within the same research design.

The UMs that we approached in Europe (i.e., in Italy, Greece and Belgium) were asked to take part in a longitudinal follow-up of two years, wherever they went over that period. With these participants, we conducted in total three measurement moments, each of which consisted of an interview and the completion of the self-report questionnaires. When necessary, we relied on interpreters. Contacts with adjusted communication tools – e.g., via email, Facebook and phone cards given to the participants – were conducted in-between the three meetings, which allowed to keep attrition as low as possible.

FIGURE 3: Nationalities per study country



Note. Italy 1 refers to the sample of unaccompanied minors recruited in Italy; Italy 2 refers to the sample of young, female Nigerian victims of trafficking recruited in Italy.

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed during this study. Before starting the project, we received Ethical Clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University, Belgium; the Committee of Ethics in Research of the University of West Attica, Greece; the Hellenic Data Protection Authority, Greece; and the Commission for Ethics in Research and Bioethics in Italy. In addition, we obtained relevant permission for the study from governmental bodies, such as the First Reception Service and Hellenic Police in Greece, and the federal agency for the reception of asylum applicants in Belgium.

PARTICIPANTS

In Libya, Greece, Italy and Belgium, we obtained data from in-depth interviews, self-report questionnaires and participant observations with 292 participants who were 16.6 years on average when they started participating into the project (see Figure 1). The majority were boys (82.9%, see Figure 2), and they came from various backgrounds: the top five countries of origin were Afghanistan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia and Pakistan (see Figure 3). As for gender and nationality, in each country, except for the sample of female Nigerian victims of trafficking, the selection of research participants mirrored national figures on the UM-populationvictims of trafficking that we interviewed in Italy).

After recruitment and a first interview, we followed the youths for a period of approximately two years along their trajectories and as they move in and out different kinds of reception settings within Europe.

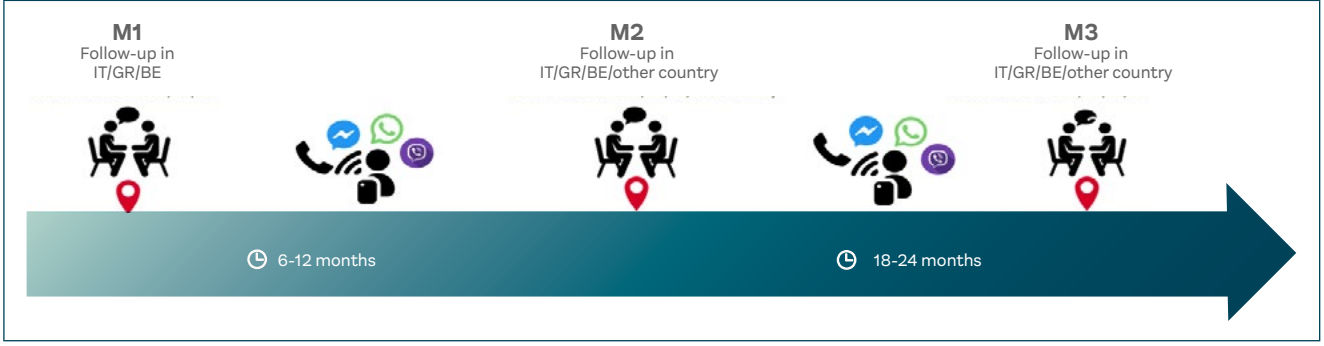
All measurement moments included semi-structured interviews and self-report questionnaires about the participants' demographic background, their journeys and experiences during their trajectories, their current living situation and future perspectives, past stressful life events, elements that help them to cope with the challenges they encounter and overall wellbeing. In-between these three measurement moments, the research team tried to keep contact with all participants through phone, social media, messages, etc.

PROFILES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Libya - The cross-sectional multi-sited study in Libya was conducted between April and July 2018, by involving 99 UMs (93 males, 6 females) we approached in detention facilities located in the surroundings of Tripoli. All research participants were detained in facilities which were managed by the Government of National Accord (GNA), facilities that received funding directly from the EU and single European Member States.

Greece - The Greek study took place between October 2017 and October 2020. While all the initial interviews (measurement moment 1) took place in Greece (i.e., in Athens, Samos and Thessaloniki), depending on the mobility of the participants, follow-up interviews were conducted either in Greece or in other EU-countries. The first measurement was conducted with 42 boys and 2 girls, aged 14 to 18 years old, to reflect the distribution of the UMs population present in the country[12]. As for the following measurement moments, 25 participants participated in a second

FIGURE 4: Recruitment and follow-up process



Note. IT/GR/BE = Italy / Greece / Belgium; M1 = first measurement moment; M2 = second measurement moment; M3 = third measurement moment.

interview, with 23 who completed their participation in the project by agreeing to a third one. The researcher conducted the initial interviews in different contexts which included first reception and identification centers, unaccompanied minors' shelters, and pre-removal detention centers. The second and third rounds of interviews and questionnaires took place in very diverse contexts, since UMs were experiencing different living conditions, e.g., homelessness, living in shelters, living with friends/relatives. Interviews and questionnaires were complemented with participant observations.

Italy – One of the two studies we conducted in Italy took place between October 2017 and November 2019. Initial interviews were collected with 39 UMs – 35 of which were males. Participants were recruited in the areas of Palermo, Rome and Ventimiglia, in formal and informal reception contexts, such as first reception centers for UMs, emergency night shelters and transit camps, and self-managed migrants' settlements supported by volunteer groups. 24 minors decided to participate in the second measurement moment, and 14 to the third one. These interviews and questionnaires were collected in different countries, across Europe, mostly in reception centers, in UMs' semi-autonomous accommodations, or in the premises of local NGOs. The UMs who participated in this study originated from Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal, Tunisia, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The second study in Italy focused on young, female Nigerians who were trafficked into Italy through the 'Central Mediterranean Route'[13]. This study started in June 2018 and ended in September 2020, with a total of 31 female participants at the start of the study, 21 young adults and 10 UMs. 22 participated in the second measurement moment, and 16 participants in the third. Recruitment took place via three non-governmental organizations specialized in the provision of care and support for adult and teenage victims of human trafficking. The researcher also carried out participant observations in facilities belonging to two of the three involved organizations. Interviews and questionnaires took place mainly in shelters or in public spaces.

Belgium – For the study conducted in Belgium between 2017 and 2020, participants were recruited in two first phase reception centers. A total of 79 UMs participated in the research at the first measurement moment – 72 boys and 7 girls, 53 UMs participants in the second measurement, and 35 in the third. While all the minors present in the centers and willing to participate were included in the study, a selection was made with regard to their nationality in order to represent the population of UMs registered in Belgium at the time of the first measurement. Preceding the interviews, two weeks of participant observation in the reception centers gave the interviewer the opportunity to gather field observations and to build rapport with the minors. Follow-up interviews were collected in the UMs' places of residence, one after an average of seven months and one after an average of 21 months. Most follow-up interviews took place in Belgian reception centers, six took place in other EU-countries where participants had moved to.

1. EXPERIENCES OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN LIBYA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The harsh living conditions experienced by unaccompanied minors in Libya have worsened significantly over the last years of conflict in the country. Regardless of whether UMs find themselves under the custody of Libyan authorities or in the hands of smugglers or traffickers, they suffer several forms of violence and cannot access their most basic material and social needs. The extremely though conditions UMs face in Libya produce detrimental effects on these young migrants' psychological wellbeing.

CONTEXT

The establishment of partnerships for the transfer of migration management capabilities and competences to non-EU countries is a long-standing strategy utilized by the EU. The strengthening of cooperation on border and migration management covers the areas of border control and surveillance, human smuggling and trafficking, and search and rescue operations. The aim of such partnership is to prevent dangerous journeys and irregular crossings by at the same time fulfilling obligations to provide protection to those in need.[14] These cooperation schemes did not end with the Libyan conflicts, which started in 2011 and keep operating up to these days – as confirmed in the recently licked draft of the Migration Action Plan for Libya.[15]

METHOD

Data were generated from semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with 99 UMs – 93 males - approached in detention facilities located in the surrounding of the Libyan capital, Tripoli. This cross-sectional, multisite study was conducted in 2018.

KEY FINDINGS

Stressful experiences jeopardize mental health

On the self-report questionnaire 'Stressful Life Events', participants who were all detained for indefinite periods of time together with adult inmates reported high rates of traumatic experiences relative to events that happened to them since their arrival in Libya. On average, at the time of the interviews, they had experienced four of such traumatic events in Libya. The most prevalent of these traumatic occurrences, reported by 89 of our interviewees, was experiencing and witnessing physical abuse. This violence is often perpetuated by smugglers or traffickers.

> *When I entered Libya through the desert, thieves took our money against our will, and sometimes they kill others in front of us... I saw it with my own eyes more than once: one was talking in the car, and they shot him, those people died in the desert.* (Male minor, Libya)

Yet, research participants confirmed that they experienced violence and abuses also when under the custody of Libyan authorities. As reported by several interviewees, Libyan police forces and especially those working in detention facilities work in coordination with smuggling networks.

> *When we were in prison, a policeman came with smugglers: we were five, three of us were women and two of them were pregnant. They beat and raped them, all of them died and only me with another man survived... They asked us to pay 2,000$... When we told them that we did not have any money, they started beating us.* (Male minor, Libya)

Experiencing imprisonment and forced labor is another traumatic event which is significantly frequent

in this study. Almost all the interviewed UMs spent time in the city of Bani Waled – 180 km South-East from Tripoli, where they were kidnapped and forced to work as they waited to cross the Mediterranean.

> *In Bani Waled, we worked against our will… They forced us to… We worked in carrying rocks in house building… and they did not pay. (Male minor, Libya)*

UMs also reported high relevance of daily stressors in the Libyan detention centers, with 95% of the interviewed UMs reporting on the self-report questionnaire 'Daily Stressors' the lack of access to material needs, such as insufficient clothing or food. The presence and work of international organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to providing social and healthcare services in these detention centers, was insufficient to secure the respect of the minimum standards.

> *We live with not enough food or water and the guards beat us every day, and they only care about money: I feel like I am still living with smugglers, not with the UNHCR. (Male minor, Libya)*

Likewise, 80% of the approached minors indicated on the same Daily Stressors questionnaire the impossibility to fulfil basic social needs, such as making new friends or being able to communicate with relatives or friends. Such figures are alarming as they are dramatically higher to what has been recorded in similar studies conducted in open asylum centers within Europe.[16] As a consequence of these conditions, the levels of reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression were relatively high in the sample.

Importantly, while more than half of the interviewed UMs had already attempted to cross the Mediterranean into Europe at the time of the interview, only two interviewees indicated they had changed their migratory plans and decided to try to return to their countries of origin. The very tough conditions in Libya thus did not seem to have any effect of halting further migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- UMs in Libya are exposed to repeated experiences of physical violence and show high levels of mental health problems. As foreseen in international law, minors should never be detained, even less in a war-torn country.
- Detention in Libya needs to be ended in order to guarantee the safety of UMs and the respect of their fundamental rights. The presence and monitoring of international agencies such as UNHCR or IOM does not lead to significant improvements in UMs' safety and in their general living conditions.
- Adequate (preventive) interventions to support UMs must consider the impact of the Libyan experience on these young migrants' psychological wellbeing.
- While border and migration control policies implemented in Libya severely impact the mental health of UMs, these policies do not seem to discourage or deter them from trying to migrate to the EU.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Derluyn, I., Pfeiffer, E., Orsini, G., Elhaj, R., & Lietaert, I. (2023). The Impact of Trauma and Daily Hardships on the Mental Health of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors detained in Libya. *BJPsych Open, 9*(1):e8. doi: 10.1192/bjo.2022.622

Orsini, G., Uzureau, O., Rota, M., Behrendt, M., Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2023). The EU governance of unauthorized migration as a game of "chutes and ladders". Evidences from Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. In I.C. van Liempt, A.E. Campos Delgado & J. Schapendonk (eds.), *Handbook on Irregular Migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Orsini, G., Rota, M., Uzureau, O., Behrendt, M., Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). Loops of Violence(s) within Europe's Governance of Migration in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. *Politics & Governance, 10*(2), 256-266.


Tunisia
Libya
SAHARA
LIBYA


BANI WALED
just
your
self
DETENTION
CENTER


UNHCR
I just

2. BORDER VIOLENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UMs experience diverse forms of violence during their migration to Europe. This is especially the case in areas of transit, such as for instance international borders or reception centers. There, UMs are particularly exposed to the violence of border guards and other institutional actors involved in the day-to-day governance of migration, as well as by smugglers and traffickers UMs need to rely on to continue their migratory trajectories. As they witness and experience extreme violence, UMs are exposed to further traumatic experiences, which negatively affect their mental well-being.

CONTEXT

Violence, which is multi-dimensional and results from the threat or the actual use of force or power against oneself, another person, a group or a community, is increasingly used as a tool for migration management. Due to the tightening of migration control and the consequent reduction of legal paths to migration, UMs depend on smuggling and trafficking networks to travel: this exposes them to diverse forms of violence and abuse. Furthermore, UMs also experience violence perpetuated on them by a variety of institutional actors cooperating in the EU governance of its borders (e.g., border guards and other law enforcement officials). As they suffer multiple forms of systemic/structural violence, UMs' trauma load upon arrival increases and their path for PTSD recovery turns harder. Border violence produces both physical suffering and emotional exhaustion, as UMs have to bargain their agency and rights and take tremendous risks to continue pursue their migratory trajectories.

METHOD

Data were generated from in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observations with 292 participants who were 16.6 years on average as we approached them in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. The majority were boys (82.9%), and they came from various backgrounds: the top five countries of origin were Afghanistan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia and Pakistan.

KEY FINDINGS

Both the findings of the self-report questionnaires our participants completed and their narratives showed huge evidence that the participating UMs are exposed to complex forms of violence, which include experiences of physical violence, sexual violence, forced removal and detention, psychological violence, racism, neglect and deprivation from basic needs. The narratives further showed that external and internal EU borders are sites where these complex forms of violence happen with significant frequency and intensity. Participants indicated that such violence is often perpetuated by border guards and, more broadly, law enforcement officials, next to

I know that the boat crossing towards England is risky. But I have been through so many things. Libya, the militia, the police and life in the streets. So I am not afraid anymore. (Male adult, Belgium)

human traffickers and smugglers. These frequent encounters with violence were strongly related to high prevalence of mental health problems as reported by the participating UMs on the self-report questionnaires.

What type of violence and where?

UMs' exposure to complex violent interactions with institutional and non-institutional actors occurred before and after entering the EU. Each leg of their journeys can be layered with several types of violent experiences:

Physical harm, such as stabbing, torture and beating or near drowning experiences. This often occurred in transit spaces (e.g., Libyan borders or EU internal borders) and, to a smaller extent, in reception and detention facilities. Several UMs reported conflicts with other refugees and staff members present in reception centers, while almost the totality of our interviewees who travelled through this route witnessed death during their crossing of the Sahara Desert and while in Libya.

> *When we arrived in Sabratha, [the smugglers] put us in a small room. [After they took us to the sea, the] boat started shrinking. […] They took us back to the same room and started beating us.* *(Male minor, Libya)*

> *[I] was injured in [my] eyes and nose… because the French police caused an accident. [At] that time, the police came to take [our] clothes, […] tents, all [our] stuff. [I] left with [my] friends, but a policeman shot [me] in the eye and in the nose with […] flash balls.* *(Male minor, France)*

Sexual violence, which often goes together with other physical, psychological and verbal forms of violence, was frequently reported, by both male and female minors and youths, especially in relation to their transit in Libya, Sudan and Egypt.

> *In Libya too, […] people just beat you anyhow. Once they see you are black and if they hear that you are from Nigeria, it is even worse! They will beat you, rape you, shoot the boys and nothing will happen.* *(Female minor, Italy)*

The testimonies we collected also revealed experiences of sexual abuse perpetuated by civilians in European host countries and, although luckily only to a limited extent, by staff members of reception centers.

> *Customers beat me, some guys [Italian] would drive by and throw rubbish on me and the other girls, spit on us and even try to force them inside the car. I was raped by some guys who pretended to be customers and sometimes they won't even use a condom. I am just thankful that I am alive.* *(Female minor, Italy)*

Detention occurred repeatedly along UMs migratory trajectory and under different forms. UMs experienced long periods of being stuck in smugglers and traffickers' safe houses. Besides detention centers in Libya, UMs' mobility was also constrained in other facilities present within the European territory – one example being that of the Greek and Italian hotspots. Moreover, UMs also reported short periods of detention within Greek police cells when intercepted in local border areas.

> *I stayed 25 days in the cell. We were about 40, then 45, then 50 people… children and adults, all together… Then they [moved] me [to] five [different] prisons and then they brought me in Amygdaleza.* *(Male minor, Greece)*

Push backs, which consisted of forcing participants' return to the other side of the border by law enforcement officers without (appropriate) assessment of the child's entitlement for protection, were narrated by our participants both at external and internal EU borders (e.g., in Niger, Iran, Libya, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and France). Those minors pushed back by the Libyan coastguard reported the frequent experience of being kidnapped, beaten and tortured as a consequence of their interception. Likewise, UMs detected at Europe's external and internal land borders reported the use of police dogs to chase and deter them from attempting the crossing. Some of the UMs wrongly assessed as undocumented adult migrants were deported, or they were sent back to the country of entry under the Dublin mechanism.

> *We were caught three hours after we went at sea [with] traffickers themselves. [Then] they sent us back, [and] they started to beat us in the room [where they put us to hide]. Then the police heard the sounds and they [went to free us] from the traffickers [and] they brought us to [the detention center of] Gharyan [where I was for] a month and a year.* (Male minor, Libya)

> *We tried a lot to cross the border of Bulgaria. [Then] we tried a lot to cross the border [with Croatia], but always when we were trying, they were catching us. [The police] will send you back, they will just cross the border back if you are... If they catch you in Bulgaria, so then they will send you to Turkey; if they catch you in Hungary, so they will send you to Serbia.* (Male minor, Greece)

Neglect and deprivation from basic daily needs are experienced by UMs when in the hands of smugglers and human traffickers, and more generally at multiple moments and longer periods during the migration process, especially when being undocumented. Yet, these forms of violence also occur in institutional (reception) settings, such as reception centers, hotspots and other identification centers.

> *In Sudan, we didn't have food, just boiled pasta and water, but it wasn't enough. The lorry was crowded, small children and babies were there. The heat and the lack of food were very difficult [to deal with.] On the way to Libya, [...] we had to drink water mixed with diesel, oil.* (Male minor, Italy)

> *One day in Samos, people came and told us that [they were] from UNHCR... We told them that where we are staying the situation is really bad, in the container that where [...] there was no light, there was no bathroom. When it was raining, the roof was dripping, the wind was going through the tent, no window, no light.* (Male minor, Greece)

Feelings of not belonging to the community, as a form of violence experienced through, amongst other events, push-backs or forced removal, experiences of racism and dehumanization, and lengthy, complex and uncertain legal procedures were strongly present in UMs' stories. All these experiences produced feelings of anxiety and powerlessness, as well as physical and psychological exhaustion.

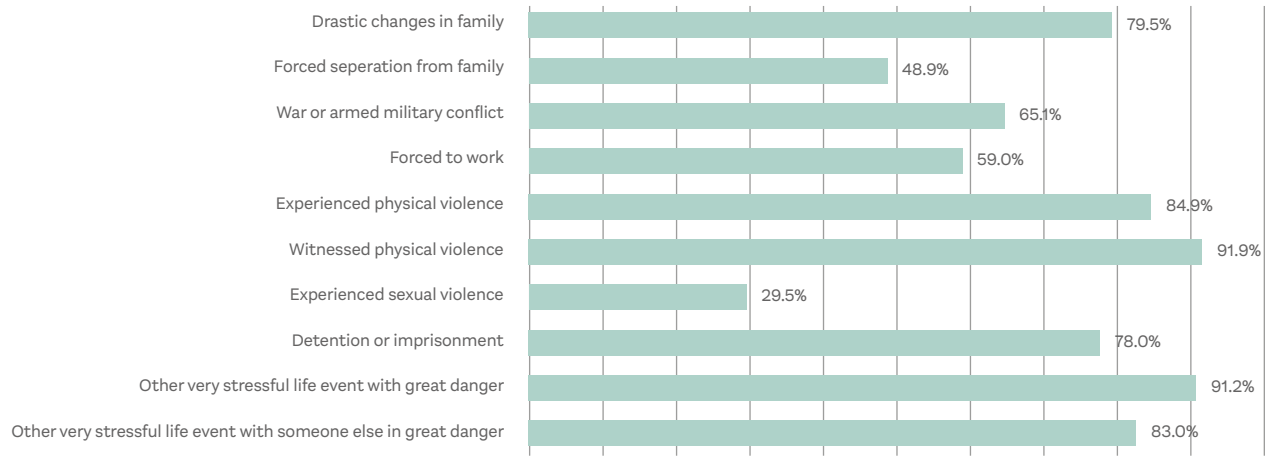
> *Yeah, in Libya [I felt I was treated differently because I am Nigerian]! It is normal, they said, we are black, we are Africans. [...] They say [that] Nigerians are bad. So, that is how they treated us. [...] They treat us different, [they] beat us in Libya.* (Female minor, Italy)

> *All of [...] guys [here have] like psychological problems. All of them. Like they stand, they sit, they cut themselves, one took too many pills to kill himself, one is jumping [...] the fence, one has put his head in the window to cut his head.* (Male minor, Greece)

Mental health impact of the experiences of violence

Prevalence rates of potentially traumatic experiences ranged from 29.5 to 91.9% (Figure 2.1). Pre-mi-

FIGURE 2.1: Reported stressful life events



gration experiences had a significant impact on symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), especially when daily stressors prevented recovery. Even though PTSD scores decreased over time, they remained high until the last measurement moment, causing long-term psychological distress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- All types of violence against UMs on the move must end, also in border areas.
- Unaccompanied minors, also while still being in transit, need to receive the protection they are legally entitled to and which is adapted to minors' individual needs.
- Unaccompanied minors' intra-EU mobility need to be facilitated in order to re-join their family networks and as such to effectively prioritize/enforce their protection.
- An anonymous complaint mechanism for unaccompanied minors, regardless of their migratory status, need to be established to enable them to report instances of violence along migratory routes and upon EU entry.
- Actions aimed at reinforcing the child protection system ensuring safety, medical and psychological support along all migratory routes and especially in borderzones must be strengthened.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2023). It happened in the desert, in Libya and in Italy: physical and sexual violence experienced by female, Nigerian victims of trafficking in Italy. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* 20, 4309. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054309.

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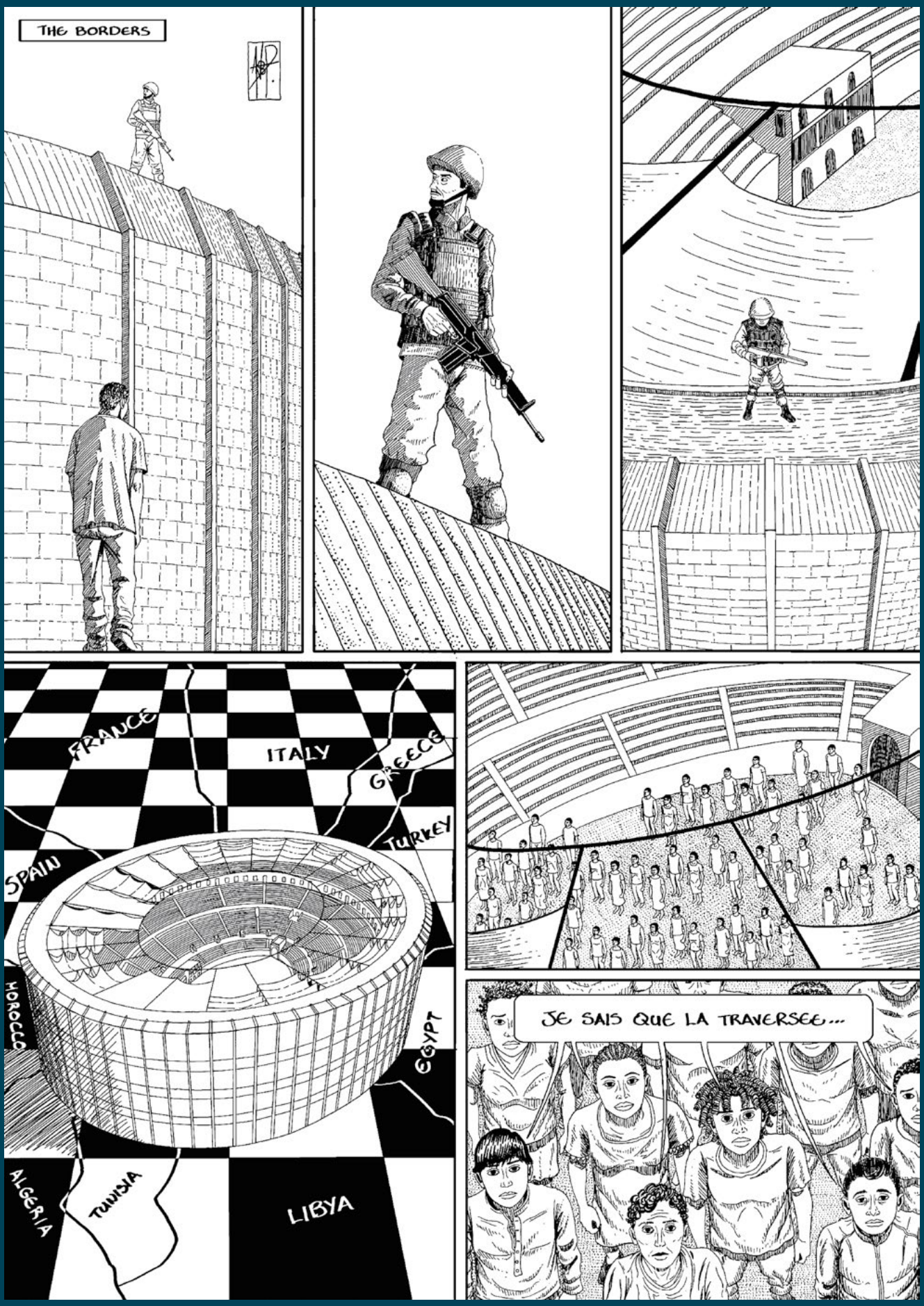
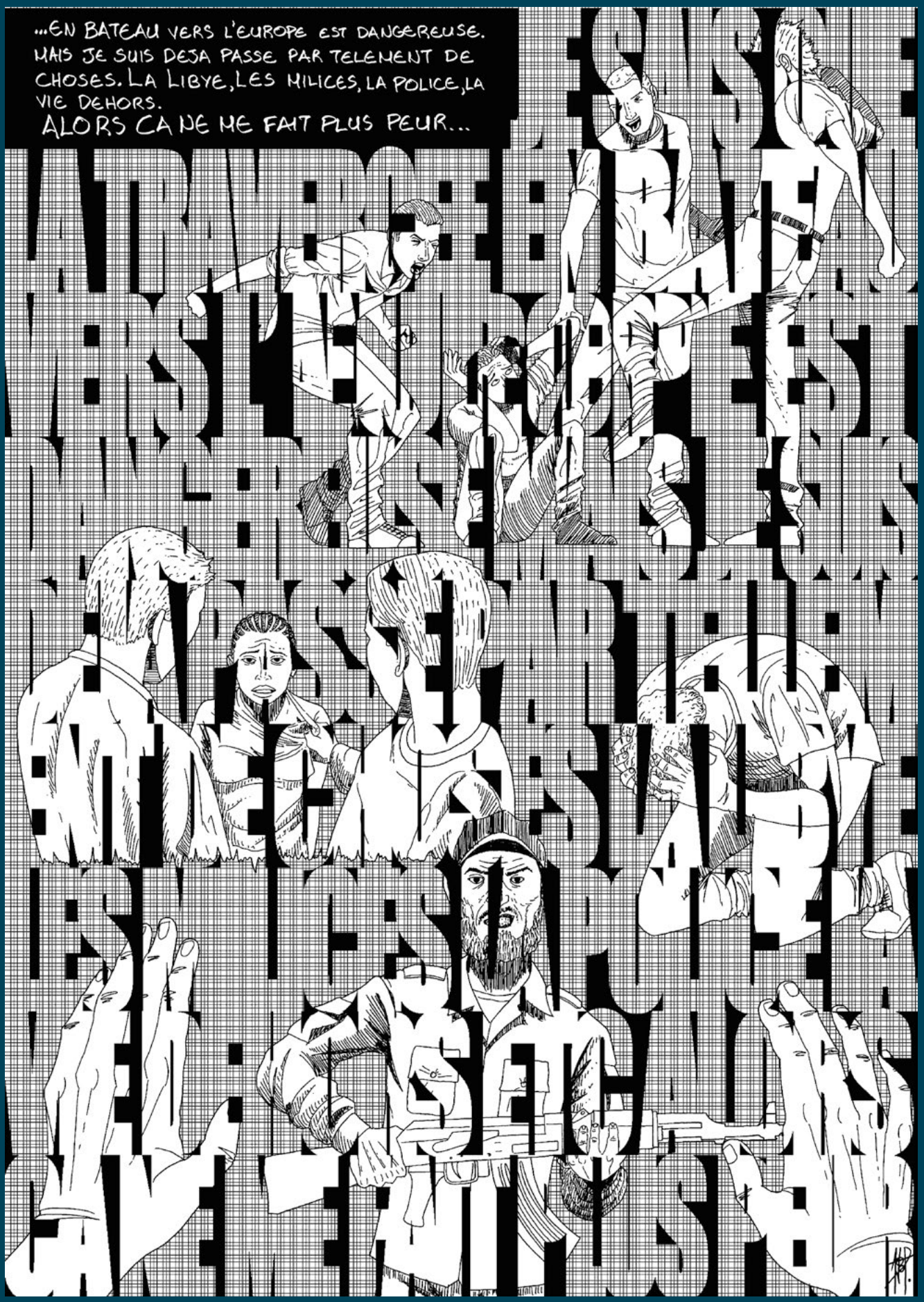
Orsini, G., Uzureau, O., Rota, M., Behrendt, M., Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2023). The EU governance of unauthorized migration as a game of "chutes and ladders". Evidences from Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. In: I.C. van Liempt, A.E. Campos Delgado & J. Schapendonk (eds.), *Handbook on Irregular Migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Orsini, G., Rota, M., Uzureau, O., Behrendt, M., Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). Loops of Violence(s) within Europe's Governance of Migration in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. *Politics & Governance, 10*(2), 256-266.

Pfeiffer, E., Behrendt, M., Uzureau, O., Adeyinka, S., Rota, M., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). Traumatic Events, Daily Stressors and Posttraumatic Stress in Unaccompanied Young Refugees During Their Flight: A Longitudinal Cross-country Study. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health, 16*, article number: 26.

Uzureau, O., Senovilla-Hernandez, D., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). 'No One Is Responsible for Me': Unaccompanied Adolescent Migrants' Experiences of Exception and Abandonment in The Ventimiglia Border Space. *Politics & Governance, 10*(2), 267-278.


THE BORDERS
FRANCE
ITALY
GREECE
TURKEY
SPAIN
MOROCCO
EGYPT
ALGERIA
TUNISIA
LIBYA
JE SAIS QUE LA TRAVERSEE...


...EN BATEAU VERS L'EUROPE EST DANGEREUSE.
MAIS JE SUIS DEJA PASSE PAR TELEMENT DE CHOSES. LA LIBYE, LES MILICES, LA POLICE, LA VIE DEHORS.
ALORS CA NE ME FAIT PLUS PEUR...

3. DETENTION OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN GREECE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2020, Greece committed to end the detention of UMs. Nevertheless, monthly dashboards published by the National Center for Social Solidarity (EKKA Greece) still show that many UMs remain in so-called 'protective custody'. This chapter reports on findings from the ChildMove project on UMs' experiences during detention and the mental health impact of detention in Greece.

CONTEXT

In Greece, the detention of UMs is a longstanding policy which is systematically used for periods ranging from a couple of days to several months. UMs can be detained in detention centers, pre-removal centers or even, among adults, in police cells. The minors are mostly detained under the term of "protective custody".

METHOD

Data were generated from in-depth interviews with 44 UMs, 14 to 18 years of age when we recruited them in Greece. The majority were boys (95.4%), and the top countries of origin were Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria. After recruitment and a first interview in Greece, we followed UMs for a period of approximately two years with a total of three measurement moments. 12 out of 44 UMs were detained at the time of the initial interview, while of the remaining 32 UMs, 17 had experienced at least one form of detention over the course of the three measurement moments.

KEY FINDINGS

When we visited Amygdaleza in July 2018, the official capacity at the minors' section was 32 children. Yet, the actual number of UMs was 54. There were no outdoor activities nor schooling offered to these young migrants, and the gate of their section was always locked and guarded. There was one social worker and one psychologist responsible for the whole population of the camp where more than 500 people were staying at that time.

Additionally to this detention in Amygdaleza, in general, a significant number of our study participants experienced detention in police cells. According to our findings, minors were detained in overcrowded cells that they shared with adults.

> *They put me in prison. I couldn't stay in prison. I had a lot of stress… I got sick and I couldn't stay there. I started to get dizzy. I couldn't stand on my feet. They were old, old people there. Some of them were selling cigarettes, others were selling drugs. They were 10 people there. This is where they took me.* (Male minor, Greece)

While staying in these police cells, UMs were often victims of violence perpetuated by inmates or/and police officers.

> *The policemen did that very often. For example, if someone was coming and asking for something or if they were asking for anything from the prison, they took them out and they were hitting them. When we were going to ask, they were pushing us away and they were telling us 'Go away'.* (Male minor, Greece)

None of the minors we interviewed in Amgydaleza were assigned a guardian during their detention, nor given any legal assistance. This despite the fact that detained UMs show long-term and high-level mental health problems, related to both past stressful

Amygdaleza detention centre 2018, former section of minors

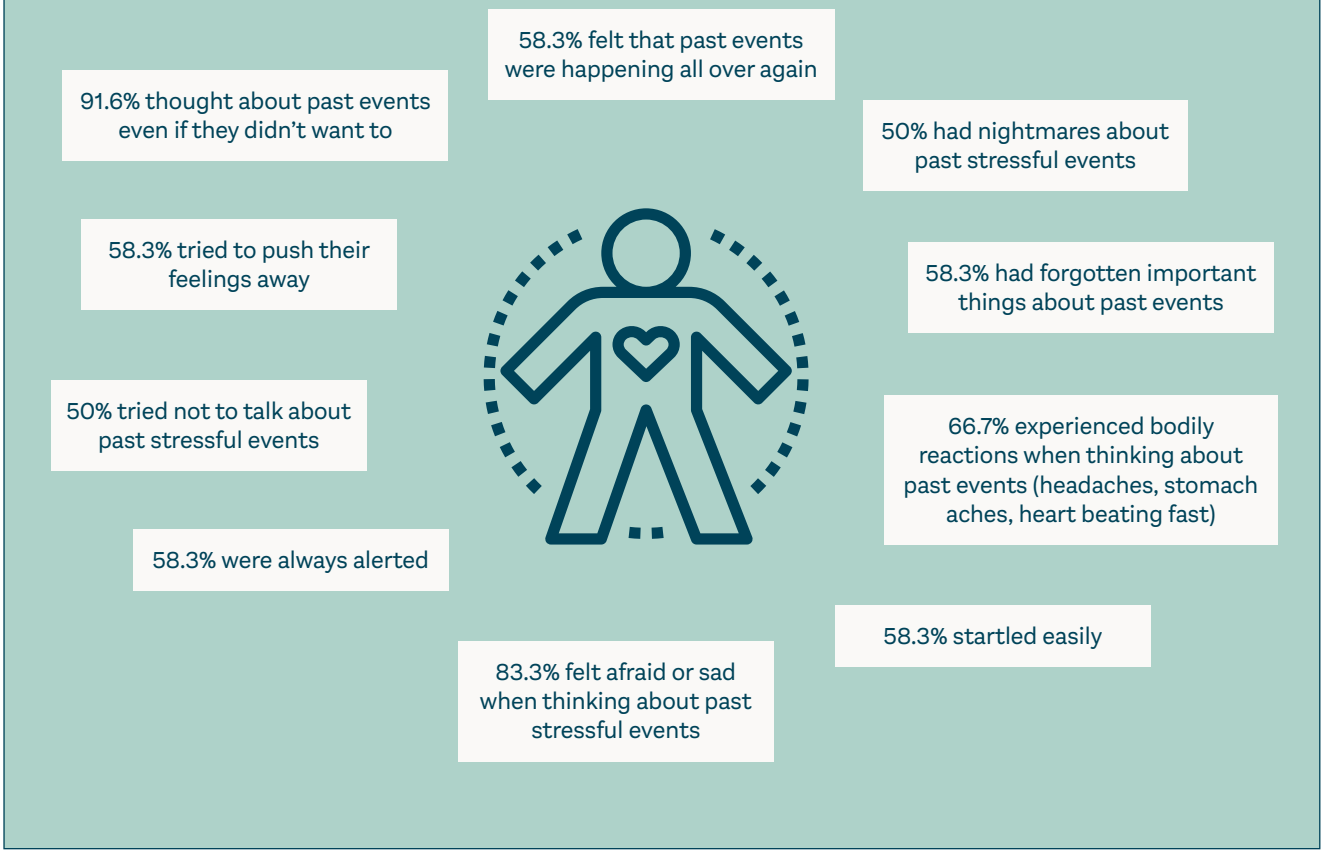
life events and their current living conditions - see Figure 3.1 on how detained UMs reacted to past stressful events, and Figure 3.2. which outlines these young migrants' psychological distress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- As the detention of unaccompanied minors is illegal according to both European and Greek national legislations, and the mental health impact of detention is very high, this practice needs to be ended immediately.
- Migration policies need to become more child-sensitive, since, at all stages of their migration, UMs are vulnerable to different forms of violence, abuse and exploitation – including, if not especially, when in detention. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the best interest of each child should be prioritized.
- Qualified and well-trained guardians are highly important to protect UMs against violation of their fundamental rights – especially in detention – so guardians' roles need to be implemented and valorized.

FIGURE 3.1: Reactions to stress related to stressful life events – Amygdaleza Detention Centre

FIGURE 3.2: Most reported mental health symptoms – Amygdaleza Detention Centre, July 2018



- Legal assistance should be provided to UMs during their asylum procedure, also during detention.
- Efforts should be made to improve the standard of UMs' reception and protection systems in countries of entry, such as Greece – e.g., increase the number of available shelters equipped with trained and sufficient personnel and make those accessible for all UMs, with no restriction of their liberty.

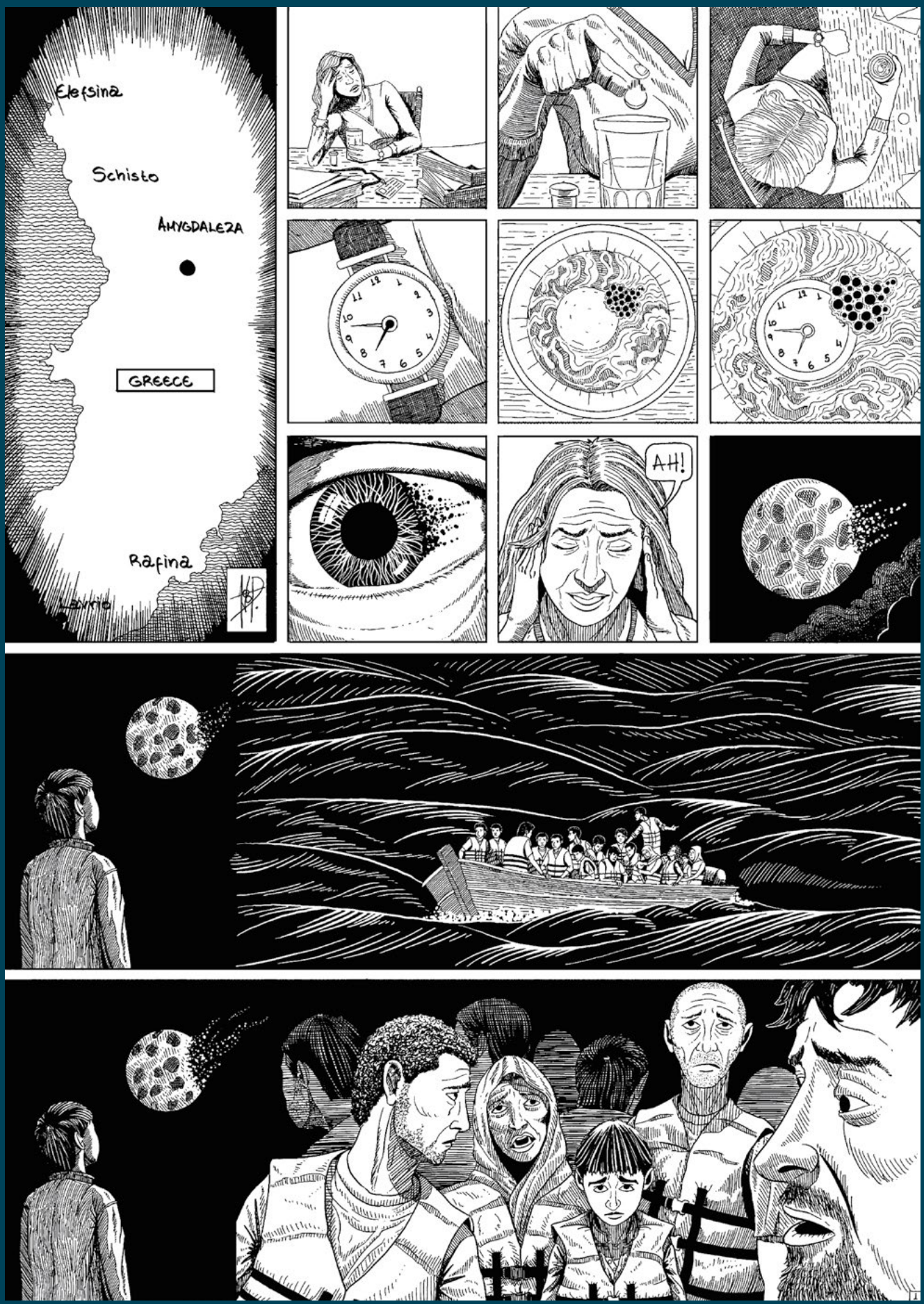
RELATED PUBLICATIONS

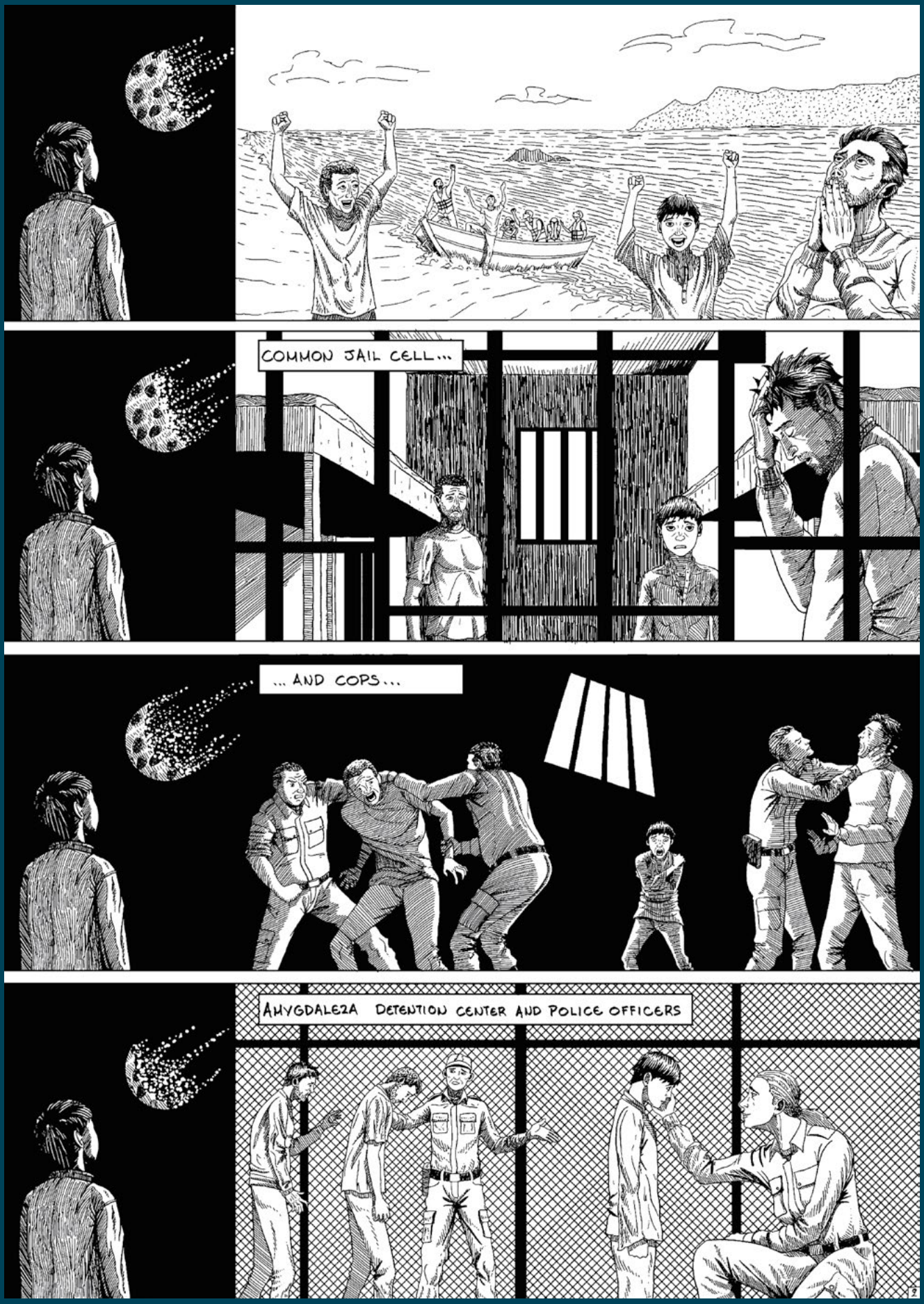
Orsini, G., Rota, M., Uzureau, O., Behrendt, M., Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). Loops of Violence(s) within Europe's Governance of Migration in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. *Politics & Governance, 10*(2), 256-266.

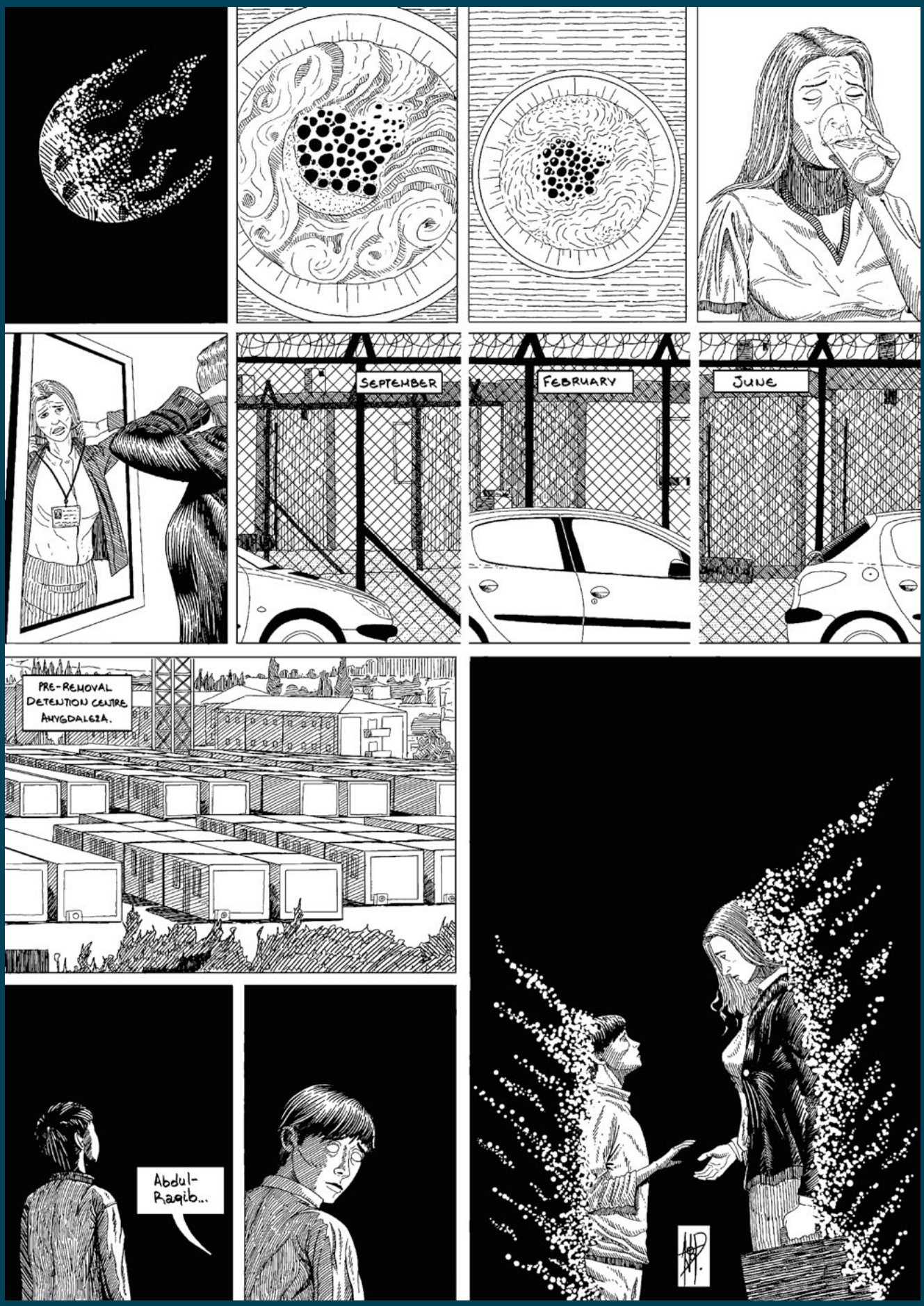
Rota, M., Uzureau, O., Behrendt, M., Adeyinka, S., Lietaert I., & Derluyn, I. (2023). Grasping at Straws: Social Work in Reception and Identification Centres (RIC) in Greece. In: E.J. Gómez-Ciriano, E. Cabiati & S. Dedotsi (eds.), *Migration and Social Work. Approaches, Visions and Challenges*. Bristol University Press.

Rota, M., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2023). EU Border Migration Policy and Unaccompanied Refugee Minors in Greece: The Example of Lesvos and Samos Hotspots. In: E.J. Gómez-Ciriano, E. Cabiati & S. Dedotsi (eds.), *Migration and Social Work. Approaches, Visions and Challenges*. Bristol University Press.

Rota, M., Uzureau, O., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). Unaccompanied young refugees in the European Union: a perennial limbo situation studied in a longitudinal perspective. *European Journal of Social Work, 25*(6),1030-1044.


Elefsina
Schisto
AMYGDALEZA
GREECE
Rafina
Lavrio
AH!


COMMON JAIL CELL...
... AND COPS...
AMYGDALEZA DETENTION CENTER AND POLICE OFFICERS


SEPTEMBER
FEBRUARY
JUNE
PRE-REMOVAL DETENTION CENTRE ANYGDALEZA.
Abdul-Raqib..

4. UNACCOMPANIED MINORS' MOBILITY IN EUROPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As for UMs, their patterns of onward mobility after arrival in Europe - also known as 'secondary movement', are very heterogeneous and highly complex, determined by a range of motives, including the ability to secure a residence permit, reception conditions, the presence of relatives and community networks, language abilities and educational opportunities.

CONTEXT

According to the EASO's 2018 annual report on the situation of asylum in Europe, more than 20,000 UMs lodged applications for international protection in the EU. UMs are often in highly vulnerable situations as they must adapt to stressful life experiences and rapidly change their living environments without parental guidance or protection. Upon arrival in Europe, UMs might decide to seek protection in the first entry country or continue their journey further to meet family members in another EU country, search for quality care, or escape from lengthy and complex administrative procedures.

METHODS

Data were generated from in-depth interviews collected between October 2017 and November 2019 with 39 UMs - 35 of which were males – who we first encountered in Italy. Their ages varied from 14 till 17.5-year-old. 24 of them participated in the second round of interviews, and 14 to the third one. Research participants originated from West African countries, such as Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Senegal, but also from Tunisia, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea.

KEY FINDINGS

The trajectories of our participants after arrival in Europe showed that their mobility is often a complex

FIGURE 4.1: The entire trajectories of our participants before and during the study

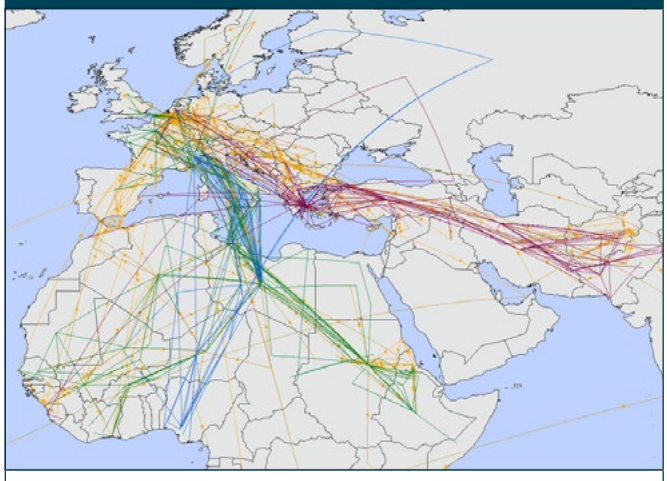
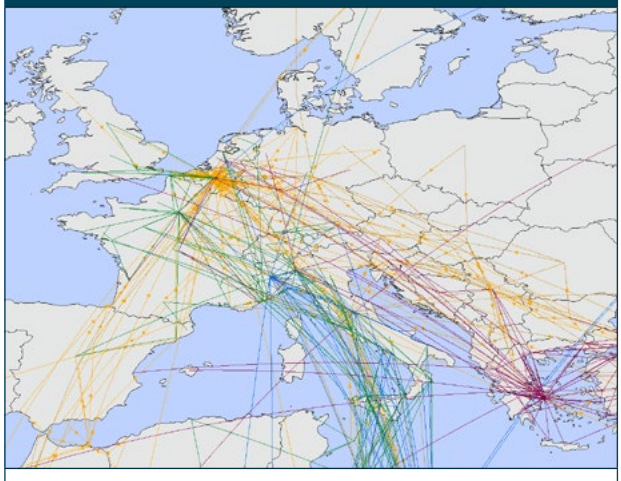


FIGURE 4.2: The complex trajectories of our participants within Europe.



process, impacted by a range of different motives, either to stay (temporarily) in a particular country or to move further (see Figure 4.1 and 4.2). In what follows, we discuss these different motives impacting their trajectories (see Figure 4.3).

Reception conditions and legal procedures

The factors leading to mobility upon arrival were diverse and influenced by UMs' migration goals and the reception conditions upon arrival. Some continued their journey until reaching their final destination and/or their family members who were already settled in another EU-country. Hereby, the poor reception conditions faced in collective reception centers and the lack of formal care and support motivated UMs' decisions to travel further.

For other participants, the constraints of the national legal framework and its implementation after arrival (e.g., denial of international or child protection, lengthy and complex legal proceedings) pushed them to search for another place to obtain legal recognition.

For some participants, we observed that new mobility occurred months and sometimes even years after their arrival in the EU, due to the experienced limited educational and employment opportunities or their inability to secure a residence permit in the current country after turning 18.

> *The social workers don't want to talk with you, but they don't have the choice, they are obliged to. […] They just do their work and when they are done, they leave.* (Male minor, Italy)

> *The first few months you are here, you look at how things work, then you will think "Well, if I stay here for a long time, will I have any advantage?" […] you know?* (Male minor, France)

In contrast, another part of our participating UMs remained relatively 'settled' during the whole study. Most of these participants had secured a temporary residence permit, rapidly engaged in educational and social activities or benefitted from a thick support network composed of formal care workers and local NGOs.

Family networks and re-routing on the move

Family members back home and/or who had settled in Europe also influenced UMs' trajectories after arrival in the EU, such as through advising UMs regarding their final destination.

What more, UMs sometimes re-routed because their relatives already settled in the EU refused or were unable to host them and to support them during their settlement process.

FIGURE 4.3: Motives in UMs' trajectories

> *I have family members in Germany and in Spain. My uncle in Germany refused to help me and I received no answer from my uncle in Spain.* (Male minor, Italy)
>
> *My mum told me to go to my aunt's house. [There], her children treated me as if I am their employee. They don't do anything. In the morning, because I don't go to school, […] I have to clean the house, […] I have to do the housework and everything. I said "No", then I called my mother that I can't stay here.* (Male minor, France)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reception processes

- First reception and emergency centers for minors should provide adequate material support and psychosocial services to meet the specific needs of newly arrived minors.
- Care workers should rapidly establish trusting rapport with newly arrived minors to help them restore trusting relationships in their designated adults.
- Practitioners need to provide information on reception systems and legal procedures in a child-friendly and accessible manner.
- Appropriately trained cultural mediators are key actors to help build trust relationships.

Legal routes and resettlement programmes

- Relocations of UMs from sending to receiving EU-countries need to be implemented quickly as to reduce waiting periods in the sending EU-country.
- In case of a relocation or the reunification with family members, appropriate administrative and legal support should be provided to family members acting as the child's legal representative.

Protection and support for UMs while being on the move

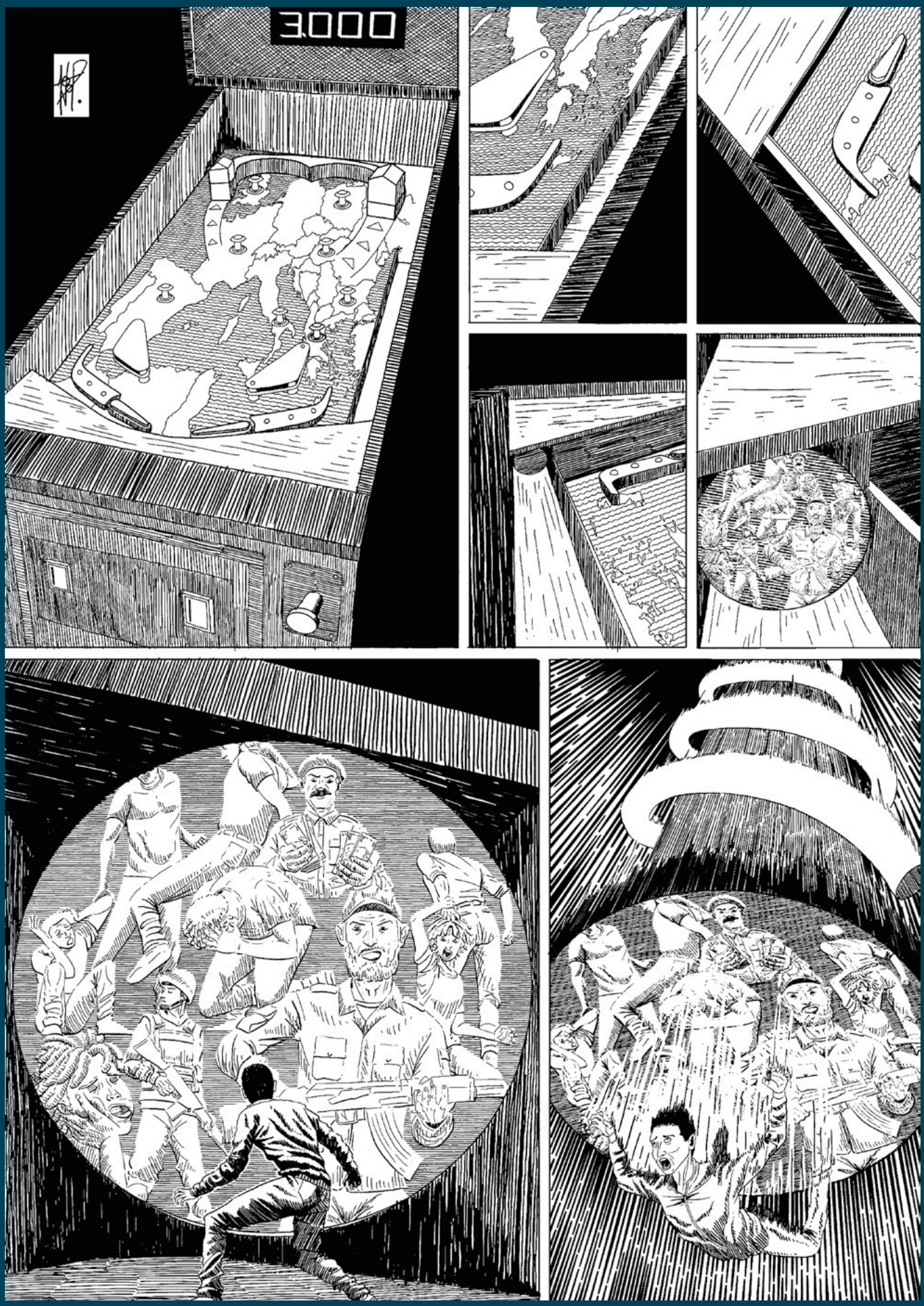
- Protection must be granted to all children in need, regardless of their legal status. The specific vulnerability of minors in transit calls for a coordinated response from local child protection services and humanitarian organizations.
- Emergency transit facilities, separated from adult migrants, where the identification of the minors does not imply their official registration, are necessary spaces for UMs to reflect on their situation, to recover, and to obtain information about available legal options.
- Multidisciplinary trained professionals in child migration and displacement themes should address UMs' holistic needs.
- Practitioners must be trained to understand UMs' complex drivers for onwards mobility, including on how to include UMs' family members in their (care) trajectories.
- Physical and mental healthcare should be unconditionally accessible to UMs on the move and need to respond to their specific needs (e.g., psychological needs, disabilities, motherhood).

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Orsini, G., Uzureau, O., Rota, M., Behrendt, M., Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). The EU governance of unauthorized migration as a game of "chutes and ladders". Evidences from Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. In: I. van Liempt, J. Schapendonk & A. Campos-Delagdo, *Research Handbook on Irregular Migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Uzureau, O., Lietaert, I., Senovilla Hernandez, D., & Derluyn, I. (2022). 'No One Is Responsible for Me': Migrant Children' Experiences of Exception in The Ventimiglia Border Space. *Politics & Governance, 10*(2), 267-278.

Uzureau, O., Lietaert, I., Senovilla Hernandez, D., & Derluyn, I. (submitted). Multi-layered mobilities: Unaccompanied minors' trajectories, decision-making and mobility after arrival in Italy.


3.000


GREECE
ITALY
"I have family members in Germany and Spain. My uncle in Germany refused to help me and I received no answer from my uncle in Spain"
"My mum told me to go to my aunt's house. There her children treate me as if I am their employee. They don't do anything. In the morning, because I don't go to school, I have to clean the house and I have to do the housework and everything..."
GERMANY
"The first few months you are here, you look how things work, then you will think "If I stay here for a long time, will I have any advantage...you know?"
"The social workers don't want to talk with you but they don't have the choise, they are obliged to... They just do their work and when they are done they leave"
FRANCE


I am Musa from Gambia. I'm learning Italian at school and I really do my best to keep up because I want to build a life here in Italy.
I finally made it and I got my work permit.
PERMESSO DI SOGGIORNO
I am Asmeret from Eritrea. I am in Belgium now, but I'm trying to reach the U.K. Often, local people provide me with some respite here..
...while at night I try my luck to cross this final border.
Politie
I am Karim from Tunisia. I turned 18 today, and the social workers at the center did everything they could to cheer me up ...
18
Because now...
REJECTED
I am an adult.
ANFOR

5. VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING IN ITALY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Victims of trafficking often experience violence and other forms of physical and sexual brutality at the hands of traffickers. Yet, there are other actors involved in their trajectories who may also exploit or abuse them in different ways. To effectively support victims in their recovery, a thorough evaluation and assessment of the existing identification and protection mechanisms must be done, and a more victim-centered approach must be implemented.

CONTEXT

Research shows that human trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar industry estimated to be worth over $150 billion, with up to four million adults and children being trafficked yearly[17]. Nigerians constitute a large percentage of irregular migrants arriving in Europe, and Nigeria remains in the top five of non-EU countries of origin of victims of trafficking in the EU. While policies are in place to tackle human trafficking and prosecute traffickers, victims of trafficking, including unaccompanied minors, still experience a range of violent and highly difficult experiences.

METHOD

Data were generated from in-depth interviews and questionnaires conducted with young female Nigerians trafficked into Italy between June 2018 and September 2020. A total of 31 participants, 21 adults and 10 UMs, were recruited via three non-governmental organizations specialized in the provision of care and support for adult and teenage victims of human trafficking. Observations were also carried out in facilities belonging to two of the three involved organizations.

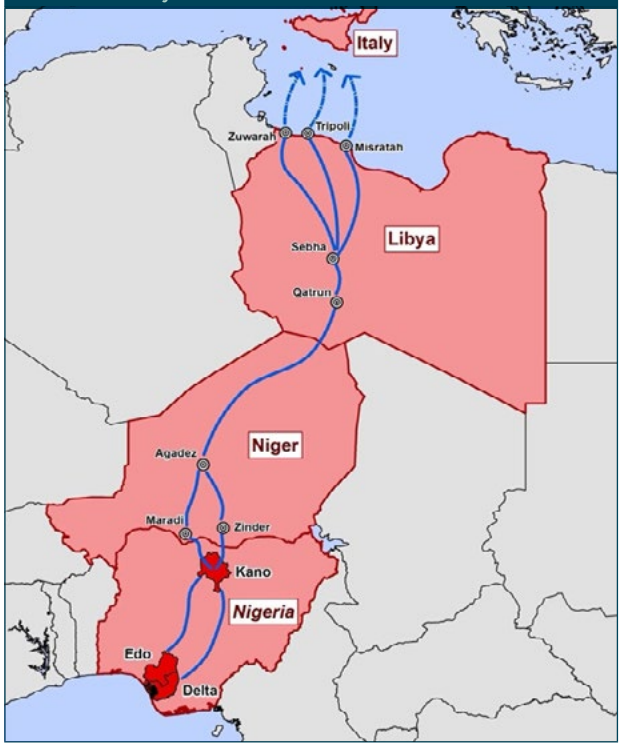
KEY FINDINGS

Research shows that a considerable part of the migrants who embark on their irregular journeys with smugglers end up as victims of trafficking. Our study showed that all our participants in this sample of victims of trafficking first embarked on the journey to Europe as 'migrants', but became victims of trafficking and were forced into prostitution throughout their trajectory. They left Nigeria with the hopes of working overseas to provide for themselves and their families, but ended up being forced into prostitution with large debts that had to be repaid.

Physical and sexual violence occurs in different phases of the journey

Victims of trafficking who travelled irregularly from Nigeria to Italy experienced non-sexual physical brutality – which was reported by 100% of the participants – and sexual violence along the way, as reported by 90% of all participants. These experiences made a deep impression on them, and, in some cases, physically harmed them before arrival in Europe.

FIGURE 5.1: The trajectories of the Nigerian participants recruited in Italy



> *We jumped on the Hilux that took us to Agadez and the desert. That was the first time they forced me to have sex, the guys at the desert checkpoint, it was very, very bad. I don't want to talk about it.* (Female minor, Italy)

> *In the desert, I was beaten and stripped by the Niger guys who wear turbans that they wrap around their head and face. The men put their hands on my body and inside it claiming to look for money and hidden things. I was touched anyhow and humiliated.* (Female adult, Italy)

The participants also experienced violence while being forced by traffickers to work in prostitution after arrival in Italy. The violence happened on the streets, but also continued off the streets.

> *Street work is hell oh, the things I saw in that place. Customers beat me, some [Italian] guys would drive by and throw rubbish on me and the other girls, spit on us and even try to force them inside the car. I was raped [gangraped] by some guys who pretended to be customers and sometimes they won't even use a condom. I am just thankful that I am alive.* (Female minor, Italy)

Escaping from traffickers does not automatically end violence

Leaving or escaping from traffickers who often use violence to force the women and girls to find more clients and earn more money did not mean that they no longer experienced violence. For some participants, the violence even continued after they had been recognized as victims of trafficking and placed in the care of non-governmental organisations.

> *The new camp is ok; they have adults and minors there and the people working there are nice. One of the staff there tried to have sex with me, but I refused, and I warned him that if he tries again, I will break his head.* (Female minor, Italy)

Experiences of labelling and stigma, especially sexual stigma

Stereotypes that are perpetuated by the society and media as well as racism lead the women and girls being labelled as all working in prostitution and being repeatedly stigmatized.

> *People always say bad things about Nigerians here [Italy], it is mostly about prostitution when you are a girl, and if you a Nigerian boy here, then you are a criminal.* (Female minor, Italy)

> *Italo people [Italians] can discriminate against you when you are black. […] If you are Nigerian, it is even worse. Sometimes if they see you coming near them, they will just move as if you want to rob them or close their nose as if you smell.* (Female minor, Italy)

Lack of sexual and reproductive health education

The participants who were victims of trafficking rarely had places to go with their questions and this led them finding alternative means to preventing pregnancies, and in the case of one young woman in the center, performing abortion on herself.

> *One of the most challenging things for me was seeing the aborted baby of my friend. She aborted her baby in the shelter and then the placenta got stuck, so we had to call the ambulance, and we saw them taking the dead baby.* (Female minor, Italy)

RECOMMENDATIONS

In alignment with the framework of the EU Strategy on victims' rights 2020-2025 and the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025, we recommend:

- Awareness needs to be created about human trafficking and about the negative impact of racism through media and other outlets. Equally, involving local initiatives would be helpful in educating society about the dangers of stigma, labelling and racism.
- Victims' rights in legal proceedings need to be recognized and protected, as also indicated in the renewed EU action plan against migrant smuggling (2021-2025). This would ensure that victims are treated accordingly, and their status will not be determined based on their willingness to cooperate with law enforcement for example.
- Since recognized victims of trafficking are under the protection of the state, a thorough vetting of staff members should be done when hiring staff to work in centers with victims to prevent them from being re-exploited or abused.

- Adequate training provision for caregivers (e.g., NGO staff, host families, etc.) of victims of trafficking and ensuring the availability of needed services/skills is crucial.
- Providing consistent mental health services is vital, given that many women and girls arrive with severe trauma from the physical and sexual violence they experienced.
- The allocation of significant resources to caregivers and responsible actors for after care - especially sexual and mental health support is highly needed. Moreover, the provision of sexual and maternal education services in languages newcomers understand is of great importance and much needed for these women and girls, so that they better understand how to care for their own sexual health and for their (unborn) child(ren).
- The development of outreach programs on sexual and reproductive health is highly needed, especially for those who are victims of trafficking. Providing services that are easily accessible and tailored to the specific local context would ensure that those who need these services, receive them.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Adeyinka, S. (2021). African Europeans: An Untold History by Olivette Otele. *Journal of Contemporary European Research, 17*(3). DOI: 10.30950/jcer.v17i3.1216

Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (review submitted). The role of juju rituals in human trafficking of Nigerians: its use as a tool of enslavement but also one of escape.

Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (submitted). 'She said this might be God's way of taking care of us'. Family involvement in human trafficking.

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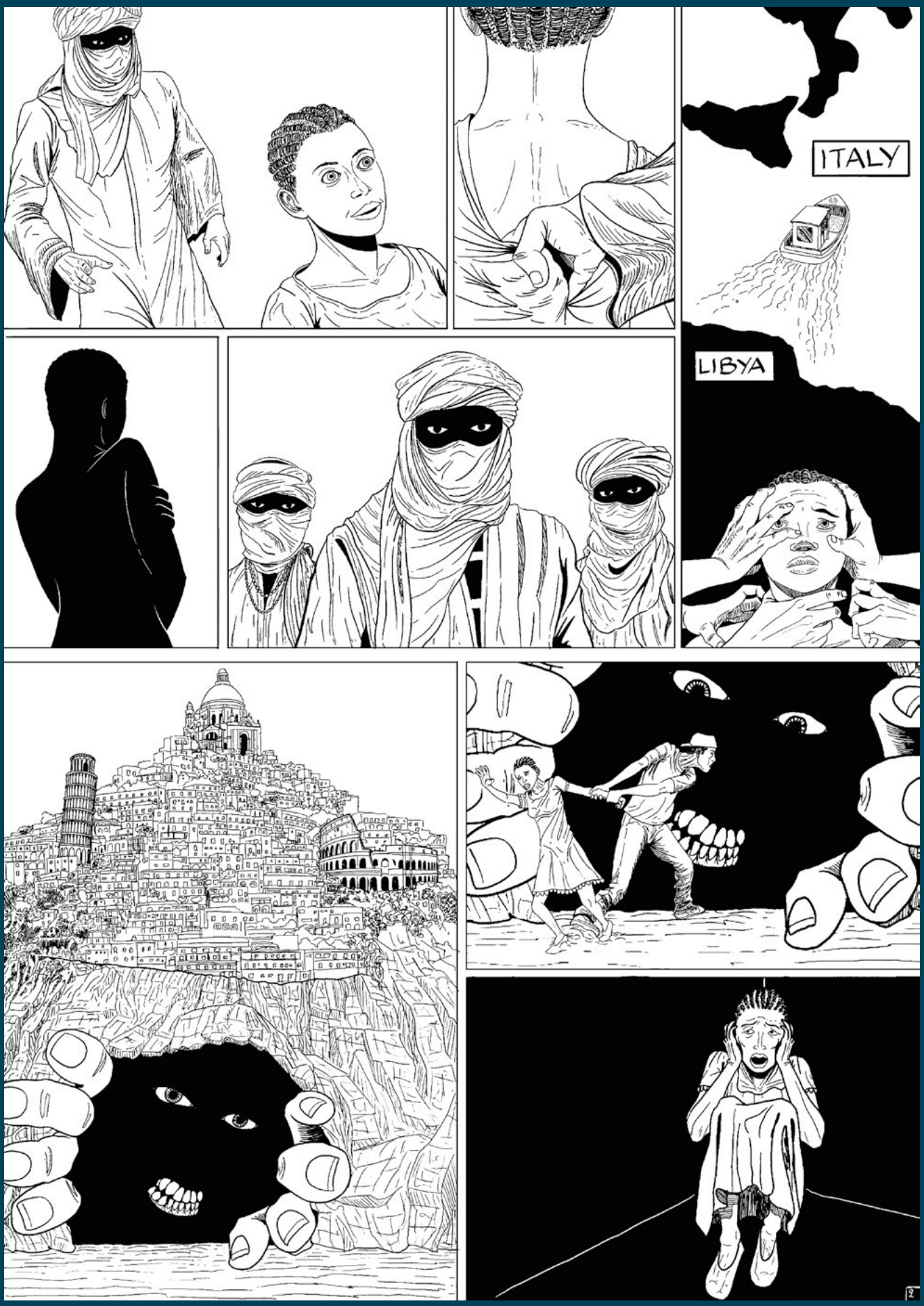
REFUGEE CAMP
NIGER
Agadez
NIGERIA
Edo
Delta
ONE YEAR BEFORE
AGADEZ


ITALY
LIBYA

6. STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stigma and discrimination have a major impact on the mental health of UMs and young migrants more generally, and our study showed that our participants were no exception. The stigma and discrimination that they encountered happened in different phases of their migration trajectories. Equally, social networks have a protective role for UMs' mental health.

CONTEXT

Research shows that the impact of stigmatization leads to devastating consequences for victims' well-being, thoughts and behavior: Newly arrived migrants and refugees may encounter certain types of discrimination and be treated poorly based on their 'presumed illegality'. Therefore, when understood in a context of migration and settlement in a new country, migrants' social interactions with host communities could be damaged by stigma and discrimination.

METHOD

Data were generated from in-depth interviews we collected from 189 research participants, 16.6 years old on average at the time of recruitment. The majority were boys (78.5%), and they came from various backgrounds, the top five countries of origin being Afghanistan, Nigeria, Eritrea, Pakistan and Guinea. After recruitment and a first interview in Greece, Italy or Belgium, we followed the youth for a period of approximately two years with a total of three measurement moments along their trajectories through different kinds of reception settings in Europe.

KEY FINDINGS

Experiencing stigma and discrimination

UMs experienced frequent (intersectional) stigma and discrimination based on their nationality, race, gender, age and their material living conditions (e.g., living in a camp) or legal status (e.g., victim of trafficking). Suffering from discrimination and stigma happened at all stages of UMs' migratory trajectories, inside or outside institutional settings, such as reception and care facilities, border posts, housing or labor market, etc. These experiences had a strong negative mental health impact, also in the long run.

> *When I first arrived in the camp after working on the streets for seven months, the woman I stayed with [the one assigned as her host] did not like me at all, because she believed that I would steal her husband, so I felt like I had no choice but to leave.* (Female minor, Italy)

> *And that is racism. I experienced this in the neighboring center where we play soccer. And then our center reacted, "if this continues, we won't go there anymore." That's in soccer, but also in school or in stores like that, it happens.* (Male minor, Belgium)

The impact of stigma and discrimination

The self-reported experiences of racism and discrimination on the Daily Stressors questionnaire increased over the three measurement moments, so as the UMs we interviewed moved along their migratory trajectories. These experiences led to a significantly heightened level of depression and this effect became stronger over time. Along with other daily stressors, experiences of discrimination also had a significant effect on symptoms of post-traumatic stress in UMs.

> *After this experience with the police, I was so scared that I wanted to return to Ethiopia. They just called me and took me to the police station where they found sixty euros in my pocket. They said, "This is counterfeit money. You have a machine at home that prints counterfeit money." So, it was terrible. They came and took everything from the house. They made me naked and checked everything, if I had tattoos. They took away my cell phone for three months.* (Male adult, Belgium)

Social and familial support

When confronted with difficult experiences, related to traumatic experiences, multiple losses, current daily stressors or the experiences of stigma and discrimination, UMs benefitted enormously from the support of their family, peers and ethnic communities, as well as the support from professional caregivers. On average, those participants who were in touch with their parents were significantly less depressed.

> *They're all the same like me. If they are alone, they have the same thing and the same thoughts. So, we know each other and we know ourselves so that's why we all hang out together, sit together, talk to each other.* (Male minor, Belgium)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Formal support

- Programs to educate and sensitize all stakeholders working with young refugees on the impact of stigma, discrimination and social support need to be expanded or initiated (e.g., teacher trainings need to include modules on implicit bias).
- Policies need to promote inclusive and safe spaces for UMs (e.g., by obliging professionals to call out racism and discrimination, across different settings).
- UMs and other young migrants suffering of stigma will benefit from the expansion and promotion of low-threshold, needs-based complaint and counselling services. Mechanisms to anonymously report instances of discrimination must respect and guarantee the privacy and anonymity of the person who is reporting.

Informal support

- Policies need to consider the positive impact of co-ethnic groups by taking a positive approach towards other religions and languages (e.g., acknowledging the significance of mosques for Muslim communities).
- Civil society structures need to be strengthened, especially migrant youth self-organizations.
- Social support from local communities is equally significant to establish bonds in the new country.
- Policies should provide UMs with spaces to engage with local peers and communities, including volunteers, for example through community sport and buddy or befriending programs, promoting horizontal connections and social inclusion.

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Behrendt, M., Pfeiffer, E., Devlieger, I., Adeyinka, S., Rota, M., Uzureau, O., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2022). The impact of daily stressors on unaccompanied young refugees' mental health: A longitudinal study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 92*(6), 681–691.

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HAHA
HAHA
HAHA
MIGRANT

7. RECEPTION AND CARE STRUCTURES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reception and care structures have a major impact on the mental health of unaccompanied minors (UMs). Next to stressful life events, material and social stressors in the host country cause high levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. Continuous support from family, friends, volunteers and professional caregivers is recommended to facilitate a healthy development and integration.

CONTEXT

According to EASO's 2018 annual report on the situation of asylum in Europe, more than 20,000 UMs lodged applications for international protection in the EU. UMs are a highly vulnerable population due to the lack of parental support, their young age and stressful experiences related to forced migration. In this context, the manner in which reception and care is organized strongly impacts the well-being of UMs who pass through or are excluded from these systems. Current policies fail to provide the necessary protection. The creation of favorable living conditions can prevent mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress, and may promote the healthy development of UMs and as such facilitate their integration processes.

METHOD

Data were generated from in-depth interviews we collected from 189 research participants, 16.6 years old on average at the time of recruitment. The majority were boys (78.5%), and they came from various backgrounds, the top five countries of origin being Afghanistan, Nigeria, Eritrea, Pakistan and Guinea. After recruitment and a first interview in Greece, Italy or Belgium, we followed the youth for a period of approximately two years with a total of three measurement moments along their trajectories through different kinds of reception settings in Europe.

KEY FINDINGS

Stressful experiences and daily stressors jeopardize mental health

UMs show long-term and high-level mental health problems, related to both past stressful life events and current daily stressors (see Figure 7.1).

Stressful life events, such as experiencing violence – which was reported by 84.9% of all participants at some point during their journey – were significantly related to high levels of post-traumatic stress. Simultaneously, scarcity of resources and material stressors led to high levels of anxiety symptoms, whereas experiences of discrimination had an increasingly strong negative impact on symptoms of depression (see Figure 7.2).

The most reported daily stressors at the first measurement moment were not having enough money, worries about the family at home, the language barrier, feeling bored and feeling uncertain about the future (see Figure 7.3).

> *It's a bit difficult because in the morning when I leave the center like this, there were youngsters at the tram stop to go to school and they say 'what's this one doing here, look he's an illegal'.*
> *(Male minor, Belgium)*

Who supports unaccompanied minors?

Family and peer support was of high importance for UMs. Contact with family, especially in the host country, had a strong positive impact on their mental health and alleviated symptoms of depression. Minors remained connected with (and concerned about) the wellbeing of family members, as well as their friends and the wider local community back home.

> *Family and friends help me a lot with advice, to find the right way, so when I'm about to do bad things, I think about it and I pull myself together.*
> *(Male minor, Belgium)*

FIGURE 7.1: Stressful experiences and their impact on mental health

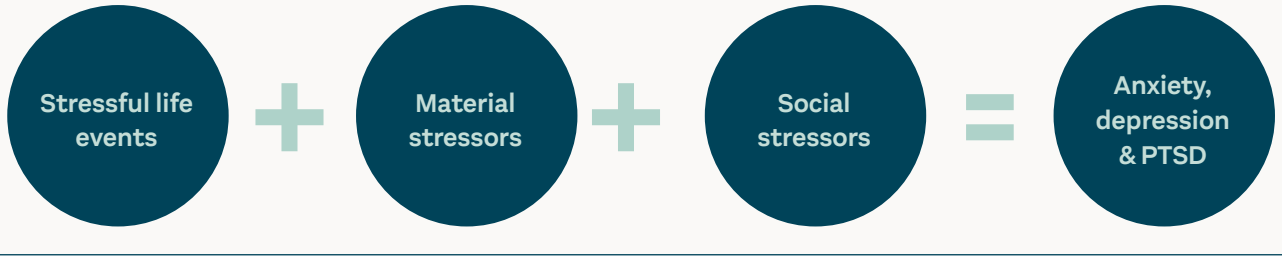
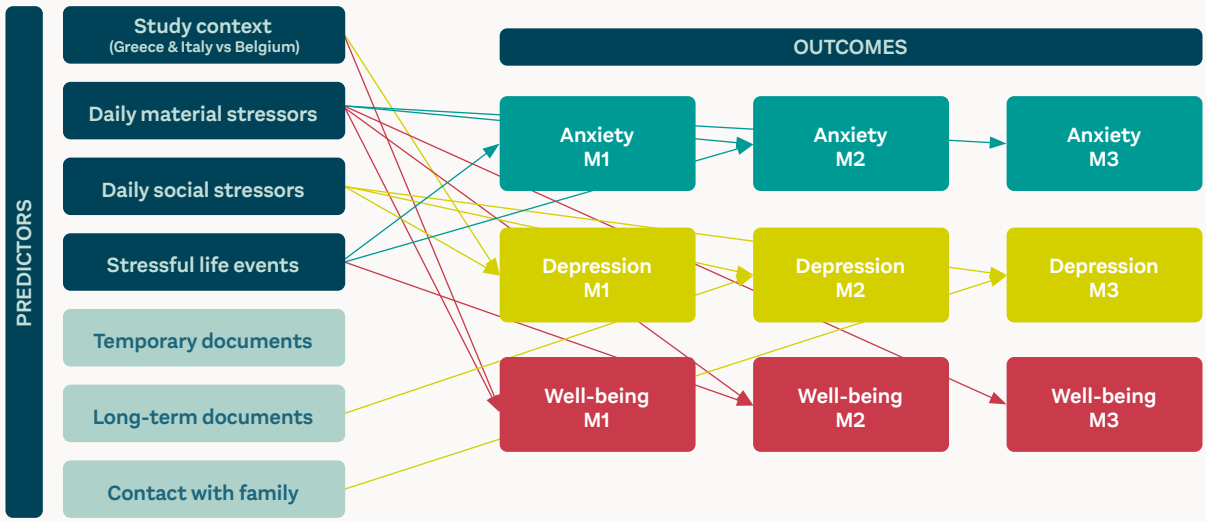


FIGURE 7.2: Associations between different predictors and UMs' mental health.



Note. M1= first measurement moment 1; M2 = second measurement moment; M3 = third measurement moment.

FIGURE 7.3: Reported daily material and social stressors

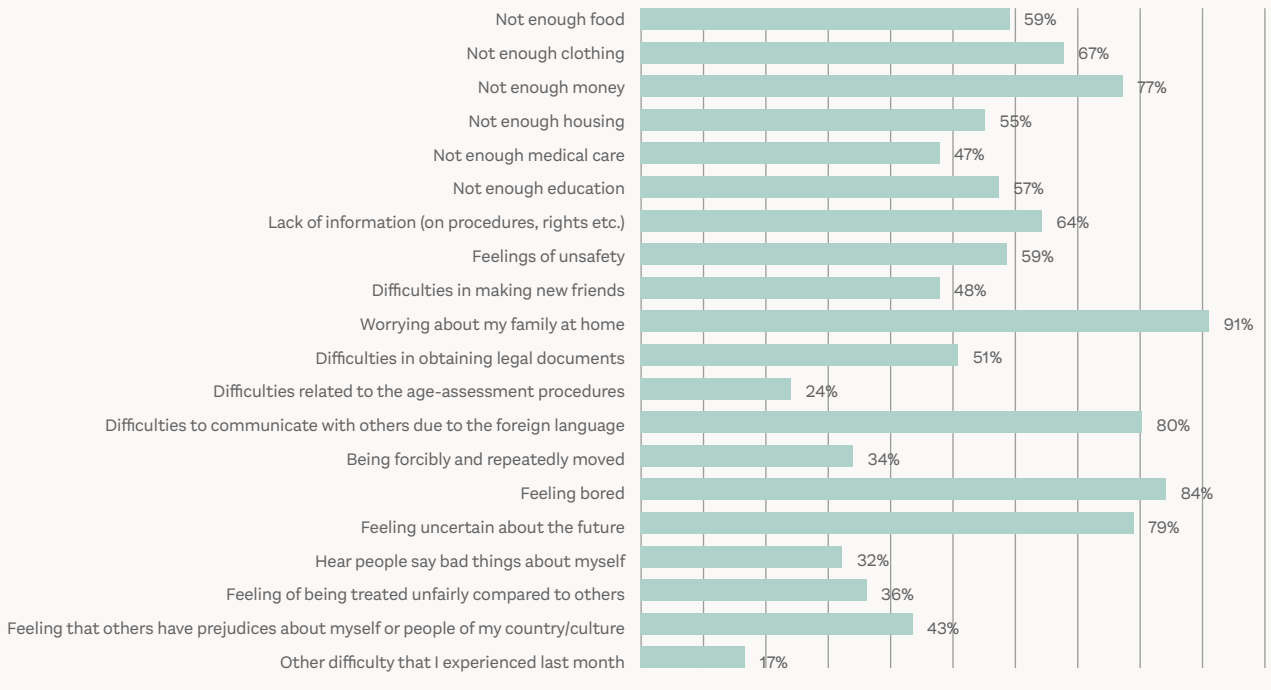
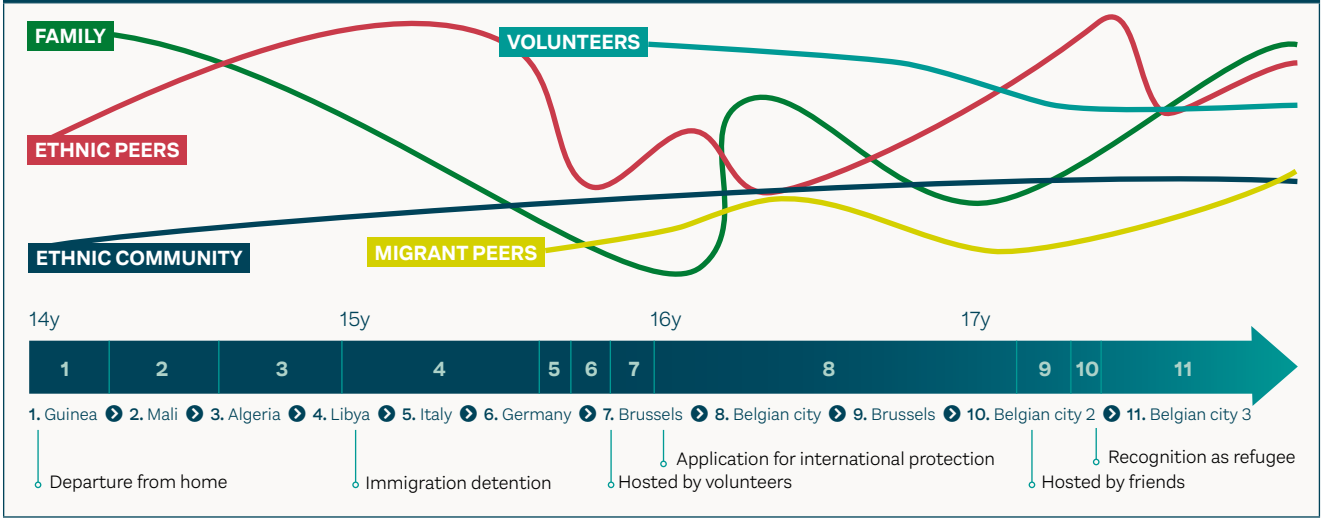


FIGURE 7.4: The changes in the social support of one participant during his migration trajectory.[18]



Civil society organizations and volunteers were another important source of support for UMs and simple acts of friendship and support fostered feelings of belonging and social inclusion. Disruptions in the young people's social networks (related to organization of care, procedures or reaching the age of majority) impeded provision of adequate care and were detrimental to UMs' mental health. Formal professional support, including from social workers, psychologists, guardians and teachers, was pivotal for UMs' mental health, but was sometimes limited.

> *To speak the truth, if I say I am not getting any assistance, it's not an exaggeration.* (Male adult, Belgium)

The role of reception and care structures

Transfers between reception centers often caused disruptions in UMs' social networks. In Figure 7.4, we visualized the changes in the amount and the quality of social support a participant from Guinea experienced during his migration trajectory.

Further, reception facilities sometimes exposed minors to different types of violence (physical, verbal, sexual), from other residents or staff members. Insecurity about legal documents and lengthy procedures (or the waiting period preceding procedures) had a strong negative impact on UMs' mental health and coping ability.

> *The most difficult experience is to live like an asylum-seeker, to live through those moments before the outcome and to integrate at the same time.* (Male adult, Belgium).

Sufficient privacy and information on care services in their language can help UMs achieve a sense of safety, control and belonging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Formal care structures

- The allocation of resources for reception facilities and the quality of services must be reconsidered to address fundamental material needs and to prioritize high quality service provision, including sufficient privacy and attention for specific needs (e.g., disability, motherhood, psychological needs).
- Close, emotional bonds are key. Young people value outreaching and engaged social workers or guardians who make them feel valued and appreciated. Given the fact that UMs' trust in authorities is often damaged, providing them material support may be an appropriate gateway to build rapport.
- Practitioners need to provide information on the reception system and procedures in a child-friendly and accessible manner (i.e., using visual means adjusted to the child's developmental age and with attention for language barriers).
- The access to and use of digital media can facilitate social support from different sources.
- Disparities in the quality of care indicate that a closer monitoring and better support of service providers (e.g., guardians) is needed.
- Next to education in trauma-informed care, practitioners need to develop culture-competency, as well as structure-competency (i.e., they need to be sensitized for structural causes of distress).

- To support the work of professional caregivers, investments in cultural mediators and their training are needed.

Continuity of support

- Regular or disciplinary transfers between reception centers should be reduced to a minimum and if possible limited to the same region.
- In order to facilitate a smooth transition into adulthood and adaptation to life in the new country, long-term care should be offered to minors after they turn 18, or when they move into independent housing. Professionals need to assess who is eligible and for how long, based on minors' individual needs and strengths.

Informal networks (including family, friends and volunteers)

- Existing networks should be recognized as a fundamental source of resilience (e.g., contact with the family can drastically improve UMs' well-being, same as their co-ethnic peers and community). Professionals need to support these contacts and incorporate existing coping resources and social support networks in their interventions. Care needs to be conceptualized more broadly. The fast processing of applications for family reunification must be prioritized to facilitate UMs' access to such support.
- Policies need to consider the positive impact of informal networks, for instance by taking a positive approach towards minority religions and languages (e.g., acknowledging the significance of mosques for Muslim communities).

Social inclusion

- Reception structures need to be designed and located strategically (e.g., UMs need to be accommodated in areas where they can easily make contact with local peers and communities).
- Democratic spaces that facilitate constructive encounters between locals and newcomers need to be created.
- In order to improve collaboration and cohesion between professionals and volunteers and to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance, volunteers should be included in reception policies, delineating their mandates and facilitating appropriate support for them.
- Policies need to promote inclusive and safe spaces across different settings (e.g., by obliging teachers to call out racism and discrimination in classrooms).

Mental health care

- In the spirit of a stepped care approach, we recommend the creation of favorable living conditions and the provision of adequate care and psychosocial interventions at an early stage in order to prevent the need for therapeutic treatment or admission to psychiatric services on the longer term. Comprehensive access to individual and adequate mental health care is needed. Early detection of UMs who do need specialized mental health treatment is key.
- Mental health services and psychological support need to be available and accessible for all UMs, regardless of their documents, language abilities, financial means, housing situation or location.
- Considering the transcultural context, mental health interventions should be sensitive to cultural concepts of healing, making them accessible and acceptable for the young people.

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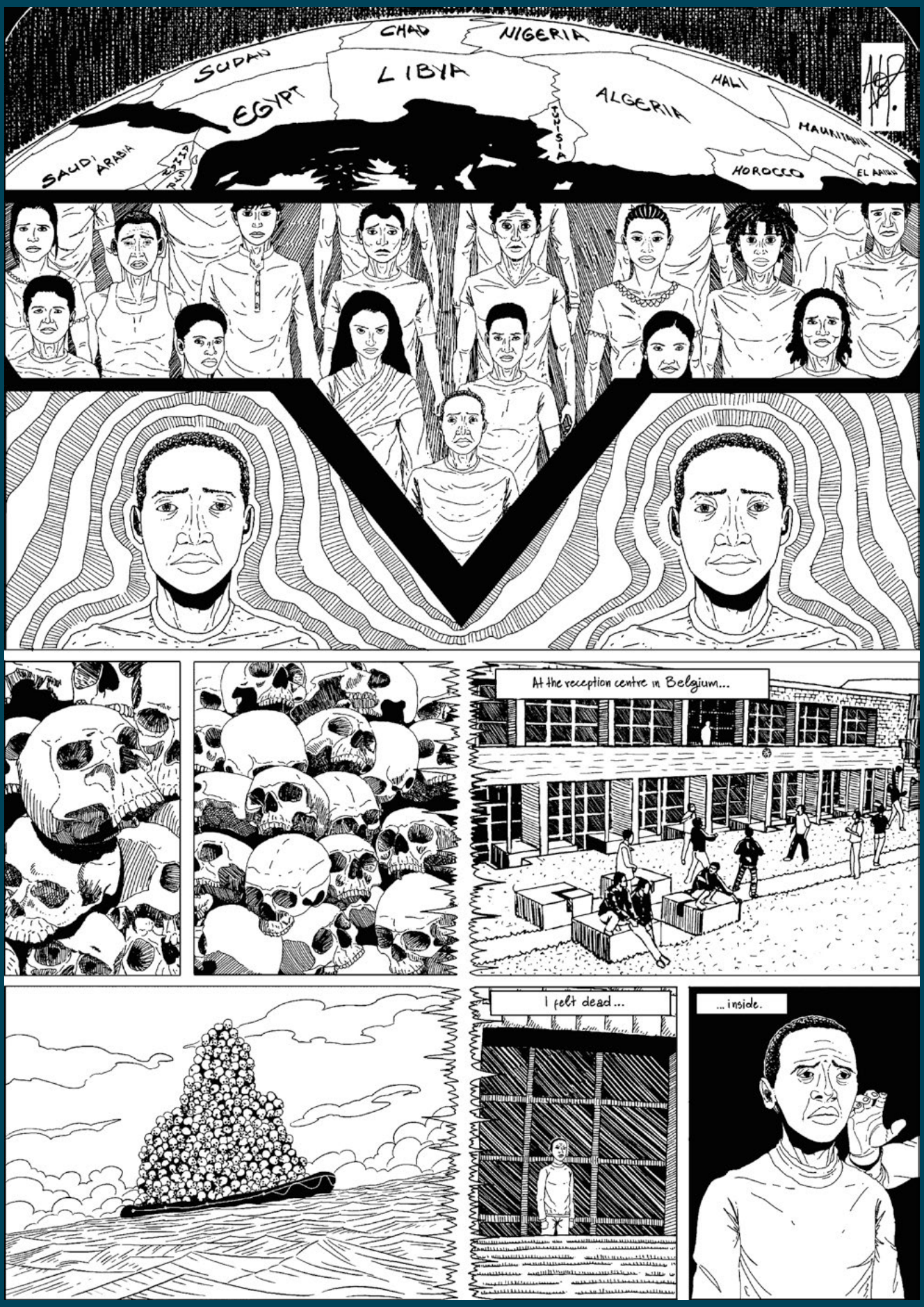
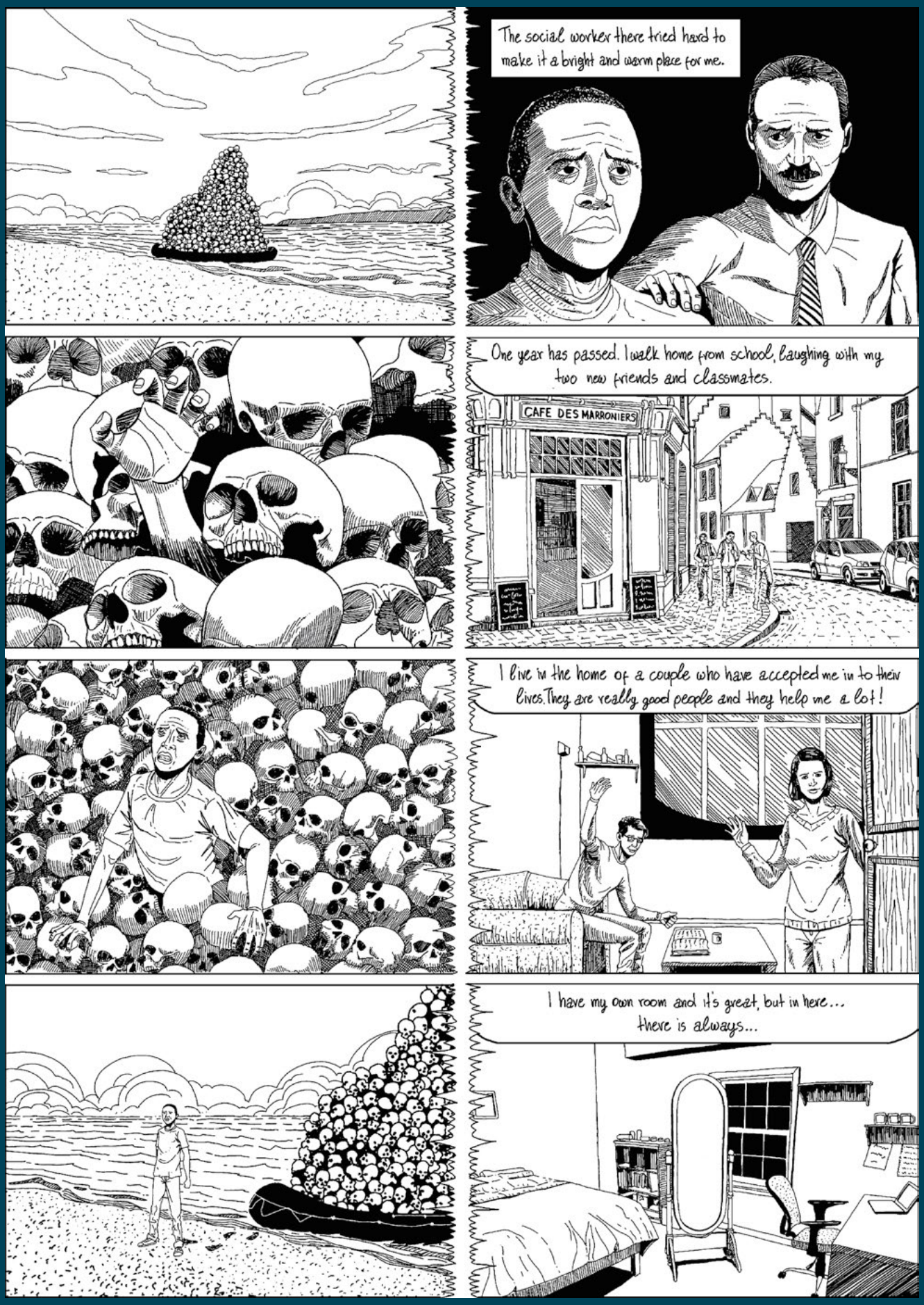
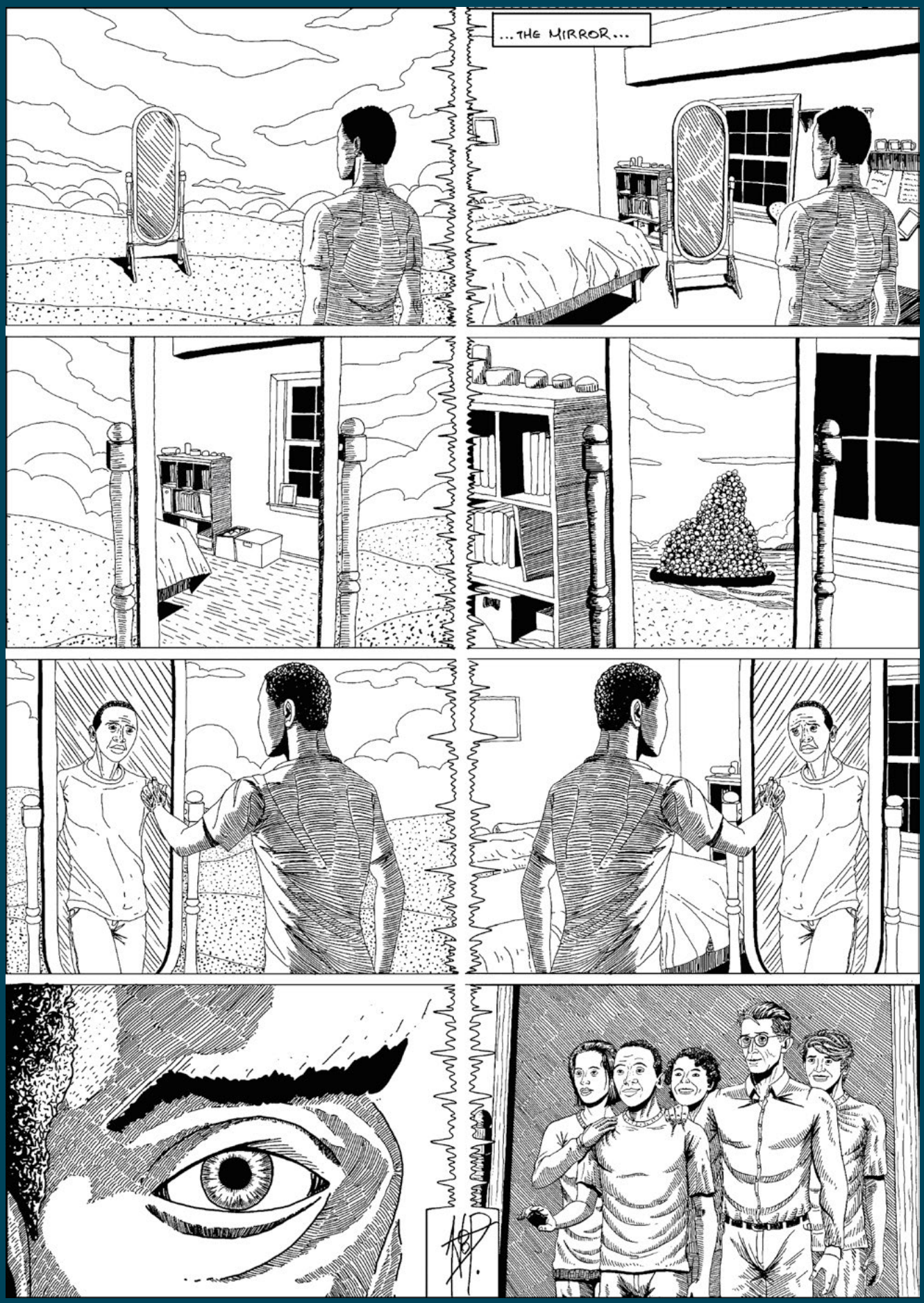

CHAD
NIGERIA
SUDAN
LIBYA
EGYPT
ALGERIA
MALI
SAUDI ARABIA
MOROCCO
At the reception centre in Belgium...
I felt dead...
...inside.


The social worker there tried hard to make it a bright and warm place for me.
One year has passed. I walk home from school, laughing with my two new friends and classmates.
CAFE DES MARRONIERS
I live in the home of a couple who have accepted me in to their lives. They are really good people and they help me a lot!
I have my own room and it's great, but in here... there is always...


...THE MIRROR...

8. CONCLUSIONS

The protection of children, even more when unaccompanied, is a priority and a legal obligation within the EU. However, as shown in this report which discusses the data generated within the ChildMove project, unaccompanied youngster moving into and through Europe are exposed to extreme dangers and the frequent violations of their most fundamental rights.

This is the case at multiple points throughout UMs' often convoluted and multidirectional trajectories. In a country which collaborate closely with the EU in the governance of migration and asylum, such as Libya, UMs are exposed to extreme forms of violence. These are perpetuated by smugglers and/or traffickers, but also by the police forces and other law enforcement agents. In general, when crossing borders located outside or inside of the EU, UMs are exposed to several typologies of physical, but also psychological, sexual and verbal violence.

Yet, once they finally reach Europe, suffering does not stop. On the contrary, it might even intensify. The case of Greece is extremely significant, since minors being found in the country are frequently detained in detention centers or police stations. Living conditions in detention were described as extremely poor, dangerous and stressful.

Things do not change much in another country of entrance for many UMs moving into Europe, Italy. Data concerning female victims of trafficking unveils the dangers these girls experience in and out of shelters. Due to stigma and extremely precarious living conditions, young women trafficked into the country face countless and harsh abuses both from their traffickers, the wider local community and the personnel of the reception facilities.

Likewise, long, uncertain, often unsuccessful and extenuating legal procedures to access protection and/or family reunification within the EU, produce significant strains on UMs. Importantly, these extenuating legal and bureaucratic procedures often cause UMs to exit from protection schemes and to proceed with further mobility within the EU.

The combination of the multiple traumatic experiences and daily stressors that UMs experience all over their migratory trajectories produces a variety of effects on their mental health, including a high prevalence of symptoms of anxiety, post-traumatic stress and depression. While policies and regulations, as well as infrastructures are in place to assist and protect these UMs once in Europe, frequently they seem insufficiently or inadequately implemented. What more, when good protection schemes are in place, other migration-governance related dynamics hinder UMs' effective access to protection. For instance, guardianship programs are very limited and insufficient to respond to UMs' needs in countries such as Italy and Greece. Due to the lack of proper emotional but also material support, UMs often decide to leave national protection systems and continue their mobility within Europe. As they disappear from the radars, they frequently end out facing further dangers in their attempts to move elsewhere and reach family members and/or friends residing elsewhere within the EU.

Likewise, even when guardianship programs functions, due to the inability to access a legal status or to navigate never-ending and extremely frustrating bureaucratic procedures, UMs often end out of any protection scheme. In contrast, and with large potential, allowing UMs' continuous support from family, friends, volunteers and professional caregivers is a pivotal protective factor to facilitating UMs' wellbeing. As such ChildMove's recommendations, based on a unique and strong evidence base, thus provide important avenues to decrease stressors and increase protective factors for UMs' wellbeing and better mental health.

A STORY

My name is Ali and this is my story[1].

I was born in 1380, in a country where the years are calculated by the sun and time does not really matter. I am the second child in the family. When I was 14 my father was killed in the big explosion in Kabul. My older sister was already married and had her own family. She and her husband were already thinking of leaving the country. They wanted their children to grow up free, to go to school, to not be afraid. After my father's death they decided it was time. My younger brother and I would go with them. I do not remember much from the day we left. My mother took us to my sister's house. It was hot and she was holding my brother by the hand. When we arrived, she kissed us all and left. This is what I remember most from that day. My mother walking away and me thinking that it's the last time I see her.

We left with the smuggler that night. We drove to the border with Iran and then continued on foot following a mountain trail. We were about 20 people, including a family with a 1-month old baby and a little girl about 3 years old. We walked at nights and stayed hidden in caves during the day. It took us 2 weeks to go down the mountain. There were cars waiting there for us and they took us to the smuggler's house in Tehran. We stayed there for a week, 20 of us in two rooms. That's where the baby died. He just closed his eyes and his life was gone. I remember his mother crying and her husband trying to take the baby's body from her arms. And when he got it, he gave it to the smugglers while all the women ran to comfort the mother. I remember holding my brother and niece in my arms and crying, crying for the baby who was gone, for his mourning mom and for my own mom who was alone and I would never see her again.

Then they separated us. We were taken to Tabriz and from there we went to Turkey inside a truck. I remember that it was night, the truck stopped and they took us all down. A smuggler drove us in a small boat. We were all hungry and exhausted but I remember thinking "so this is the sea, how big it is". I did not know then that the seemingly endless stretch of water in front of me was just a lake, and that the time to cross the sea had not come yet. I do not know how long it took us to cross the lake by boat. I remember falling asleep, and then suddenly my sister shaking me to wake up. They took us out of the boat and put us in another truck. At dawn we arrived at one of the smugglers' houses. We stayed there again for about a week and then arrived in Izmir. It has taken us almost 1.5 months since we left Kabul, but it seemed like years.

We didn't stay there for long, maybe 2 or 3 days. They loaded us in cars again, I can't even remember how many cars I had been in since Kabul. They'd load 10 or 20 of us in a car and told us to be really quiet. Then they drove away real fast while we prayed.

So that night they divided us between 4 cars. My sister's family was in one of them, me and my brother in another. After a long drive we reached the shore, and I saw the sea for the first time. They brought us to a plastic boat and told us to get inside. We were 14 people, men, women, and children. We were all looking at each other and no one wanted to go in. Some men told the smugglers that they had paid for a normal boat. I told them I was waiting for my sister. I think we were all just trying to avoid getting inside. Then one of the smugglers pulled a gun and stuck it to the head of a small child. "Get in now, and leave" he shouted. We went in one by one. Go where? And how?

A smuggler got in and started the engine. Then he pointed to a young man and said to him: keep driving towards the lights on the opposite side. That's it. The only thing I remember from this trip is being seasick, having my eyes closed, holding my brother in my arms, and praying while other people next to me were crying. And then the engine turned off and I felt water on my feet. I thought "this is it, now we will drown". I heard someone shout: we have arrived. I opened my eyes and saw the shore in front of me. Some said: "we are back in Turkey" while others said

"no we are in Europe, in Greece". We got out of the boat and into the water up to our waist. I took my brother on my shoulders and walked to the shore. The first thing I did when I reached the ground was to fall at my feet and thank Allah. After a while the police came and told us that we were on the island of Samos, and we were all happy. I was thinking, "now I've arrived in Europe, our problems are over."

The police picked us up and took us to town. There they gave us warm clothes and tea. A family that was with us since the beginning of the trip told us not to say that we are alone because they will separate us. So we declared that we were their children too. They took us to the camp and gave us blankets to sleep on. We were all exhausted and all we cared about was closing our eyes a little and feeling safe. I was looking around to find my sister because her phone was off. "Do not worry, they will bring her here tomorrow at the latest," the woman of the family we lived with told me. That night I slept under the stars and woke up from a deep sleep without dreams with the first light of day. The first thing I did was look for my sister. I got up and started walking inside the camp and as I walked I wondered if this was really Europe. When after a while I returned to the place where we had slept, the people who were with me said that we need to go and register to get a paper and leave for Athens. But I did not want to leave without my sister. We all went to the camp together and applied for the paper. We were told to return after a few days to get it.

As the day progressed and the camp woke up, I could not believe my eyes. Thousands of people, men, women, young children, some living in containers, others in tents, others in the forest. No toilet, no bathroom. We stood in the queue for lunch for 1,5 hours. The day was hot and the sun was burning. They gave us a bottle of water, which I drank almost immediately. A woman next to me said, "That was all your water for today. I hope you have the money to buy more." My brother and I sat in the woods and ate in shock. So this was Europe? I thought about my house and my mom, my clean clothes and the food she made for us every day and I felt a sob go up my throat. We spent the next few days in a tent with the other family. We only went out to get food and to go to "the toilet". We kept hearing noise from the camp. At night we heard voices and cries from all around. On the third day at the camp, my sister called me. She was in Athens, and they would leave in a few days for the border. The smuggler had asked for more money because the border was closed and the crossing more difficult. She said the money was not enough for everyone.

My brother and I were now safe in Europe, and we had to be patient. As soon as they arrived in Germany, she would send us money to go find them. I listened to her without speaking and I felt my whole body trembling. We were both crying when we hung up the phone. I looked around, thinking about where I was, how insecure I felt in Europe, and how much I missed my mom. I had never been so scared in my life. Not in the mountains in Iran, not in Turkey, not even at sea. My brother was standing next to me and had heard it all. He hugged me and cried.

My brother and I stayed at the camp in Samos for about 2 months. Those were the worst months of my life. The family that was with us had left. One day a social worker saw us and realized that we were alone. They took us from the tent in the forest, and put us in a container inside the camp. The container had no door, no windows. It had four beds, but 8 -10 people slept inside, some of us in the beds, others on the floor. At night, people would get drunk and bang on the containers to scare us. I was afraid to sleep, afraid that they would come in and hurt me and my brother. He slept at night, and I slept a few hours in the morning. I remember that some days I was very sick, I had a fever and no water to drink. My brother was crying and begging me not to die and leave him alone. I think that this was the reason I got better. If I was alone, I would have left myself to die, but I could not leave him there alone.

One day, some other children from the camp told us that they would sneak into the boat at night and leave for Athens. My brother wanted us to go with them. Our sister had arrived in Austria where she and her family had been put in a camp. At the moment she could not do anything to help us, it was up to us to get out of there. We left the camp in the afternoon and went down to the city. The other kids had some money, and got cookies and water from the supermarket to take with us. As soon as it got dark, we went down to the port. Large trucks were waiting

there to get on the boat, so we hid underneath the tracks. From there we saw the big blue boat coming, and as soon as it arrived at the port we got hooked under the trucks and got into the boat this way. We had to stay there until the boat left, and the parking dock was empty of people. I do not know how we did it. My heart was beating so hard that I thought they would hear it and find us. I remember sitting in the parking dock together, handing out cookies and water and laughing, thinking about what we had done. As soon as we arrived at the Athens port we just mingled with the people coming out of the boat and left. One of the children knew someone in Athens and all 5 of us went together. I remember crossing a bridge to take the train, the sea behind us, and the clear blue sky. I was thinking "everything will be fine".

We stayed in Athens for a few months, just to make some money so that we could continue our journey. I was selling cigarettes at night in the city center, that's how I started smoking. Others did worse things, drugs or sex with old men, but I had my brother with me and I had to be careful. When we had made some money, we left for Patras. The goal was to board the boat to Italy from there.

In Patras we lived in an abandoned factory. It was not so nice there. When the boats to Italy came to the port, if you had money you could pay someone to smuggle you inside a truck. If, like us, you did not have money, you tried to get inside or under the waiting trucks - like we did in Samos. But in Patras they had police patrols chasing us and beating us. One day they stabbed a child in the foot to prevent him from getting into the truck. Rough times.

We stayed in Patras for 3 months. We worked in the fields sometimes, we ate and bathed in an organization's facility in the city, but otherwise we lived in the factory. It was already winter, and it was cold and raining constantly. We had some blankets, you would lay down to sleep and then wake up because the blankets were too wet to bear. We had already tried to leave 5-6 times without success. One night that we waited by the fence behind the port, we saw the police searching under and inside the trucks with flashlights. As soon as they passed in front of us, my brother and two of our friends ran and got under the first truck. The other two of us were waiting for them to finish searching the next truck so that we could do the same, but we were spotted. They started shouting and chasing us, while we started running in the opposite direction, and suddenly I fell. I do not know how and why that happened, I am generally very good at running. But at that moment I fell and I was caught. I remember getting beaten on the back and legs with a crowbar and then being handcuffed and lifted up. My friends had managed to leave. They put me in a police truck with others. The last thing I saw when the door closed, was the truck with my brother underneath it getting on the boat to Italy.

They took us to the police station. I told them that I was a minor and showed them the paper I had from Samos. I was told to sit on a bench with others and wait. After about two hours they came and told me to take off my shoes. Then they put me in a cell. There were a lot of people in there. Young, old, foreigners, Greeks. I spent 25 days in this cell. Very bad things happened there every day and we, the younger ones, always suffered the most. They shouted at us, beat us, and made us sleep on the floor. There were two cells, a big one and a smaller one. You would sleep in a cell with 40 or 50 people there, and when you woke up there were maybe 12 more of them. Sometimes they gave us food, other times they did not. When you asked for clean water, most of the time they did not give it to you. When there was no food, they would give us 4 euros to buy food from the police station canteen, but there was nothing to eat at that price. You had to save money for two days to get something to eat. If you asked for anything, the police would take you out of the cell and beat you. I was kicked a couple of times, two or three kicks. On the first day they took our cell phones, but after a few days they gave them back to us to keep us quiet.

Then I learned that my brother had arrived in Italy. They had managed to get out of the boat and were continuing on foot. I wrote to him that I was fine and that he should go on and try to find our sister, and that I would join them soon. I remember he sent me photos from the train station in Milan, dirty and distressed but smiling. Eventually he failed to go to Austria. He and the other children travelling with him crossed the Italian-French border and arrived in Paris, where the brother of one of the children lived. He took them to an organization, and they settled

them in a house. It took him 2 months to get to Paris. During all this time I was taken from one prison to another. You never knew what would happen. They would get you out of the cell, and then load you on a truck and take you away. I was so scared. I changed 5 prisons. One was in Patras, 10 minutes from where they kept me for the first 25 days. The next two, I didn't know where I was. The last one was the Foreigners' Division in Athens. They kept us in a cell, young and old together, for 10 days and finally all the minors went sent to Amygdaleza. There I stayed in a container with 12-14 people. Some slept in the beds, others on the floor. At first they told me that they would take me back to Samos because that was what my papers said, and that I should have never left. Finally, they took me to a camp in Ioannina. When I arrived in Ioannina my brother was already in Paris.

I stayed at the camp in Ioannina for about 6 months. I was so tired that for the first few weeks all I did was sleep. Then I started making plans. My sister was in Austria, living in a camp with her family. My brother was in Paris, and because he was very young, he lived with a foster family. At first, I thought of staying in Greece. The camp was good and my lawyer told me I could get asylum. There I met two children from Afghanistan and one from Iraq. They were good company, we went for walks in the city, we went to school, we felt normal. The child from Iraq had been granted asylum and was waiting for his passport. I remember that when he became 18, he took us out on the city and bought us food. Then after a week he left the camp. Apparently when you get asylum, after you turn 18 they throw you on the street. Nobody cares what you become. I never understood that. They keep cats and dogs in their houses, and they throw us on the street. Then I decided that there was no reason to wait for asylum in Greece. My friends and I decided to leave.

We started one Sunday morning. We took the bus to Thessaloniki, and from there we jumped on the train to North Macedonia. It was a cargo train, it did not carry people. We stood at the junctions between wagons, and that way we reached the border. We were very scared but we thought that there is nothing for us to go back to, so we continued. It was about 10 o'clock at night when we arrived at the border and we thought that if we pass now the darkness will hide us. Unfortunately we did not know that there are German police there and they have special glasses that they can see at night. They started shooting at us and we stopped. They caught us and took us to a North Macedonian border station. There the police beat us, took our fingerprints and deported us back to Greece.

We slept at the Greek side of the border, and the next day we entered North Macedonia again from another crossing point. When we started our journey we had 100 - 150 euros each. We bought nuts and water, and we all had a sleeping bag each. We slept during the day in the forest behind bushes, and as soon as it got dark, we walked. We had a map and we were trying to find our way with it. We all had cell phones, but we kept them turned off to save battery. Every few hours, we'd turn a cell phone on to make sure we were going in the right direction. It took us 10 days to reach Serbia. The moment we crossed the border we saw a police car. We were so scared. We thought that they would send us back, and that we would have to do this whole trip again. We had nothing, the food was over, our clothes were lousy, and we were exhausted. But the car just passed in front of us and continued on its way. At that moment I thought "maybe we can do it".

We walked for a long time until we reached a village. There we went to a tavern and bought as much food as we could afford with what little money we had. We asked where the nearest refugee camp was. It was two hours away, but a man who heard us asked, "How old are you?" and when we told him he said "you are just kids, I will take you to the camp myself". They let us sleep inside the tavern and the next day this man came to take us to the camp. We got there very early the next morning, and had to wait outside for the people working there to arrive. We told them we were minors, and showed them photos of our birth certificates on our cell phones, and they let us in. We stayed there for a month to recover from the trip. They gave us a room, we could wash and clean our clothes. Our stomachs were not well after so many days of only eating nuts, but after a few days we got better. We had very little money left, but one of our friends contacted his uncle in Italy who sent him money. We used that money to buy travel supplies

and got ready to start our journey again. We knew that there was a river, which was the only passage. All other places were well guarded. From the camp to the river we travelled by bus. It was a big river, but our friend's uncle had arranged with a smuggler to cross us. I found myself inside a plastic boat again, but fortunately for a short journey, just to cross the river. We continued on foot from there, and after 4-5 days we reached a village in Bosnia. The locals gave us food, water and clothes, and told us that in order to get to the camp we had to take the bus from the city. We went to the city by taxi. The taxi driver refused to take any money, and even paid for our bus tickets. Everyone in this village was very helpful, I will never forget them. The bus ride was about an hour and then we had to change buses. We arrived in Sarajevo and we stayed at a camp there for about ten days. Because we all had photos of our birth certificates on our cell phones and they saw that we were minors, they let us stay.

10 days later we left for the Croatian border by bus. Just before arriving to the city, the police stopped the bus and took all foreigners out. They put us in their cars. It was very scary, they had guns and wore hoods and uniforms, and they took us to a big camp. There we said we were minors and they made us sleep in a tent in front of the place where they were distributing the food. This camp is the worst place I have ever seen in my life. Thousands of people living like animals, one on top of the other.

My friend called his uncle, who told him to stay there for a few days until he finds a smuggler to get us out. But after about 10 days we decided that we could not wait any longer in this place. So we left on foot, and after 12 days we arrived in Croatia. The moment we crossed the border, the Croatian police caught us. They took our phones, power banks and our shoes. They left us only the clothes we were wearing. They took us to the police building and there they asked us if we had proof that we were minors. When we showed them the cards from the Bosnian camp, they took some scissors and cut them in pieces. Then they gave us some papers to sign that said that we were adults. When we refused, they told us they had other ways to get us to sign and started wielding their batons. As soon as we signed, they prepared us for deportation.

They make you walk in twos, one in front of the other. While you walk, they hit you with their clubs. They do not even care where they hit you, they just hit you anywhere. This way, they crossed us over to the Bosnian side again. At night we stayed at the border, and then we started walking back to the Bosnian camp. It was 30 km away, but we had nothing to continue our journey with. When we arrived, we were in a bad state, our feet were injured from walking without shoes, and we were sick for many days. We decided to wait for our friend's uncle to find a smuggler, after all. We stayed at the camp for about a month. Just trying to survive until it was time to leave.

My brother in Paris was doing well, he had started going to school, while my sister and her family were also safe in Austria. I just had to hang on until I could join them. When my friend's uncle notified us, we went to a place outside the city where the camp was. A taxi came and picked us up. After 3 hours we arrived at a house, where we stopped to change cars. For the crossing of the border he put us in the trunk of the car. Because I was the smallest, he put me in the place of the reserve tire. Then he put the cover on top of me, and my friends on top of the cover. He had removed the plastic divider between the trunk and the back seat, so that we could breathe. We travelled like that for 6 or 7 hours. Then he stopped, and took us out of the trunk. "This is Austria," he said. "You have to call your uncle to tell him we are here, and he will send the rest of the money so that I can take you to Italy." At first I thought I misheard. I asked my friend "Is this really Austria?" He understood, he hugged me and said: inshallah, we will meet again. I waited with them until they got back in the car to continue for Italy.

Then, I started walking in the direction that the smuggler showed me. I was alone but I knew I was getting close to my family. I walked for many hours, about 20 kilometers until I reached the nearest village. When I arrived, it was early in the morning. The whole village was sleeping, the only place open was a bakery. I approached a man who was loading something in a van. He looked at me and said something I did not understand. Then he made a sign with his hand, meaning "Are you hungry?" I nodded yes, and took all the money I had out of my pocket - it was 11 euros. He laughed, went back to the bakery and re-

turned with a warm loaf of bread and a cup of hot coffee. When I tried to give him the money, he refused and showed me a bench next to him. I sat down to eat while he continued working. I sat there eating bread and drinking large sips of coffee, and felt my eyes fill with tears.

The same man helped me find my sister. Now I have been in Austria for 2 years already. I have applied for asylum and I am waiting for an answer. My sister's asylum application was rejected, but she is still here, making one objection after another. I go to school, learn the language, working part time at a bakery (not the one with the good guy, but it's great here too) and wait. I will soon be 18, and I hope to get asylum status and be able to continue my life.

I have not seen my brother since that time in Patras, but we have spoken with the family that he lives with, on viber. He already speaks French well, and they want to adopt him. I am not sure how to feel about this. I do not know what my mom would think. For her own safety, we have not spoken again since we left Kabul. She does not know where we are. Every time my phone rings I think it might be her, even though she doesn't have my number.

ENDNOTES

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