
The migration process of young migrants in Barcelona

El procés migratori de joves migrants a Barcelona

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Abstract

The continuous arrival of young migrants is now a reality in Spain and in Barcelona in particular. Learning about and understanding the migration process is, therefore, essential to develop adequate fostering processes that meet the needs and ensure the rights of these young migrants. The purpose of this article is to explore the migration process of young people migrating to Barcelona unaccompanied, with special attention to their motivations and to their experiences during the migratory journey.

A descriptive qualitative study (R&D project funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation, RTI2018-095259-B-I00, MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE) was conducted. This study consisted of semi-structured interviews of young migrants living at

various foster centres or living on the streets, and of educators and professionals working with these young people. The results show that the conditions in their countries of origin and their search for a better future are the main reasons that motivate young people to emigrate. Extremely harsh journeys are reported as well as some surprisingly positive experiences, and this information could be an essential factor in helping to change the way that we, as receiving societies, view the migratory process of young migrants.

Keywords

Young migrants, migration process, reasons and motivations for migration, migration experiences, young migrants in Barcelona, fostering processes.

Resum

L'arribada constant de joves migrants és una realitat a Espanya en general i a Barcelona en particular. Conèixer i entendre el procés migratori és, per tant, fonamental per a generar processos d'acolliment adequats que donin resposta a les necessitats d'aquests joves migrants i en garanteixin els drets. La finalitat d'aquest article és abordar el procés migratori dels joves que migren sols a Barcelona, amb una atenció especial a les seves motivacions i a les experiències que viuen durant el trajecte migratori.

Es va dur a terme un estudi qualitatiu descriptiu (projecte d'R+D finançat pel Ministeri de Ciència i Innovació, RTI2018-095259-B-I00, MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE) consistent en entrevistes semiestructurades a joves migrants acollits en diferents centres o que viuen al carrer, així com a educadors i professionals que treballen amb aquests joves migrants. Els resultats mostren que les condicions en els països d'origen i la cerca d'un futur millor són les principals raons que motiven els joves a emigrar. També s'hi descriuen trajectes extremament durs, així com algunes experiències sorprenentment positives, que podrien constituir un actiu essencial per a ajudar a canviar la percepció que, com a societats receptores, tenim del procés migratori dels joves migrants.

Paraules clau

Joves migrants, procés migratori, raons i motivacions per a migrar, experiències migratòries, joves migrants a Barcelona, processos d'acolliment.

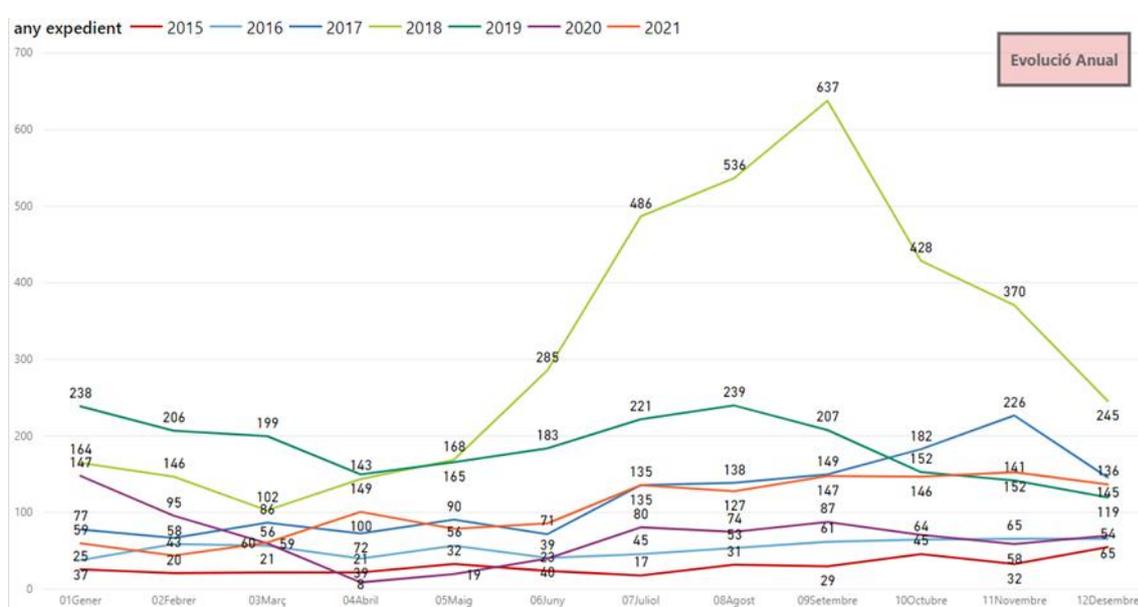
1. Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing number of young migrants not only in Spain but across the rest of Europe as well (Barbulescu & Grugel, 2019; Menjívar & Perreira, 2019; Vinaixa, 2019; Rivas & Tarragona, 2018; Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). According to the Spanish General Commissariat of Immigration and Borders, cited by the Ombudsman (n.d.), there were 9,030 unaccompanied foreign minors (*menores extranjeros no acompañados* or *MENAs*¹) in Spain on 31 December 2020. Andalusia leads the ranking of autonomous communities with the highest number (2,507) of unaccompanied migrant minors under guardianship or foster care of the Spanish child protection services, followed by the Canary Islands and Catalonia, with 1,849 and 1,168

minors, respectively. This has created a new social phenomenon in Spain, known as “unaccompanied foreign minors”, referring to young people (whom we could also call minors or children) under 18 years of age from non-EU member countries who have migrated irregularly, according to State policy, without their parents or a legal guardian (Gómez-Quintero et al., 2020; Perazzo & Zuppiroli, 2018; López-Reillo, 2011).

There has been an irregular upward trend in the number reaching Catalonia over the last few years. A peak was attained during the summer of 2018, with the arrival of 637 young migrants in September (see figure 1). This was followed by a significant drop over the last three years, most likely due to the pandemic and the closure of borders. The average number of arrivals at present is about one hundred a month, returning to values similar to those of 2017 according to the Directorate General for Child and Adolescent Care (DGAIA - Direcció General d’Atenció a la Infància i l’Adolescència, 2021).

FIGURE 1
Number of new arrivals under the protection of DGAIA



SOURCE: Directorate General for Child and Adolescent Care (DGAIA), 2021.

According to data for 2021 from the Government of Catalonia, there are 3,288 unaccompanied minors under the protection of the Child and Adolescent Protection System of Catalonia and of this total, 1,268 came to Catalonia in 2021. 97 % of these young migrants were boys between 16 and 17 years of age. However, of the total number of young people under foster care, 52 % are 18 years of age or older. Most of these young migrants in Catalonia come from Morocco and sub-Saharan African countries. In general, of the total number of minors under the care of the Directorate General for Child and Adolescent Care (DGAIA), 32.4 % are young migrants, who in turn represent 51.4 % of the minors in residential centres.

Young-migrant migration processes have been widely studied (Meloni, 2019; Mohamed-Abderrahman et al., 2018; Perazzo & Zuppiroli, 2018; Rivas & Tarragona, 2018; Marco, 2015; Auger-Voyer et al., 2014; López-Reillo, 2011, among others). Although structural and common causes have been identified and linked to situations in the countries of

origin (Torrado, 2012) such as poverty, armed conflicts, and lack of opportunities, among others (European Emigration Network, 2009), not all young migrants migrate for the same reasons. Likewise, while some aspects of the experiences of these young migrants during their migratory journey may be of a common nature, as López-Reillo (2011) states: “[...] these general assessments serve exclusively to contextualize some situations or to identify obvious motivations [...]” (p. 42) but we also need to be aware of the heterogeneity of the group (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014; Torrado, 2012) and, consequently, consider the particularities of their experiences as well as their own accounts of their migratory processes.

Given this context, the subject of this paper is set within the broader framework of the research project entitled “Intercultural and interreligious dialogue to foster a culture of peace in young people and unaccompanied foreign minors (MENAs) in Barcelona and Melilla” (RTI2018-095259-B-I00, MCIU/AEI/FEDER, EU), one of the main objectives of which is to make visible the situation of young migrants in Barcelona and Melilla. Thus, knowing why young people migrate, what drove them to leave their countries of origin, what their journey was like and what experiences they had during the process are key aspects to understand these highly complex processes and to better facilitate and develop fostering processes that meet the needs of these young migrants.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to explore the migratory process of young migrants coming to Barcelona, with special attention to the causes that motivate their migration, and to their experiences during their migratory journey.

2. Methodology and research tools

To achieve the objectives of this research, a qualitative-descriptive study was carried out using interview and discussion group techniques. The interviews were held with educators and the discussion groups were conducted with young migrants, as a methodological approach allowing the interaction of participants and the holding of a discussion in an open and relaxed atmosphere (Lopez, 2016) in which points of view may be complemented or different opinions raised, thereby generating a discourse (Martín, 1997). This is also a technique that allows extensive information to be compiled with only minimal intervention of the interviewer (Mayorga & Tójar, 2004). Three semi-structured interview scripts were developed: one for educators and professionals from foster care centres and services; one for the young migrants at these fostering centres; and another for the young migrants living on the streets. The scripts were prepared on the basis of the dimensions to be explored and were validated by a committee of experts.

For the analysis of the interviews and discussion groups, the interviews were transcribed and then categorised according to the previously established dimensions and categories as well as any new ones that might emerge. The interviews and discussion groups were analysed by pairs of researchers and then shared with the rest of the research team. A triangulation process was then carried out between the analyses of the interviews with educators and the interviews and discussions with young migrants so that the results obtained could be complemented and contrasted. The analysis process, both for the interviews and the discussion groups, was carried out using the QSR NVivo v.12 qualitative analysis software.

This paper specifically addresses the results regarding young migrants' migratory processes obtained from the interviews and discussion groups carried out in Barcelona. The responses of these young migrants were triangulated with those obtained in the interviews with the educators in order to widen our view and thus obtain a broader perspective of the same event. The migration process is a sensitive topic that is not easy to approach, especially when there is no link between the young migrants interviewed and the researchers. The account of the educators is therefore invaluable to support specific aspects of the migration process, such as the reasons for migration and the experiences undergone during the journey.

2.1. *Participants*

The results presented here are drawn from the interviews and discussion groups carried out in Barcelona. The interviews (n=14) were conducted with educators –8 women and 6 men – from the emergency protection service (2), the first reception and comprehensive care service (8), sheltered apartments for young people from 16 to 18 years (1), and external resources such as a drug addiction treatment centre (1), training services (1), and educators working with young migrants living on the streets (1), all within Barcelona Province. All interviewees were informed of the research and interview objectives, and of the confidentiality in the processing of information, and they gave their voluntary consent to participate.

The professionals interviewed were roughly between 20 and 40 years of age, with professional training in social integration, social education and, in two cases, other degrees outside the educational field. Their professional experience with young immigrants and in fostering centres ranged from one year to over 15 years.

A total of 7 (n=48) discussion groups were conducted with young migrants: 5 groups with young migrants from fostering centres (3 in first reception and comprehensive care centres, 1 in a sheltered apartment for young people from 16 to 18 years of age, and 1 in a residential centre for educational attention – CRAE and foster centre) and 2 groups of young migrants living on the streets. Permission was obtained from the Directorate General for Child and Adolescent Care (DGAIA) as the body legally responsible for the guardianship and care of young migrants. Participants were informed of the objectives of the interview and the conditions under which it would be conducted, making it clear that participation was voluntary, that they would not receive any type of payment for their participation, and that they could end their participation at any time. Each young migrant gave his/her voluntary consent to participate in the discussion groups.

The profile of the young migrants participating in the discussion groups was as follows: mostly men (46) plus two women, aged between 13 and 21 years, mostly from Morocco but also from other African countries such as Ghana, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Mali, among others. They all had a good command of Spanish and many have been in more than one foster centre in Spain.

Both the interviews and the discussion groups lasted about an hour and in most cases they were conducted by two researchers, with one conducting the interview while the other attended to the recording process and other more technical aspects.

3. Results

The reasons why a person decides to migrate are diverse, as are the conditions under which he or she does so. However, the migration processes of young people who migrate alone, although not generalizable, do have some aspects in common.

Firstly, this is usually a decision that the young person does not share with his or her families, as they are well aware of the risks involved and the conditions under which many young people migrate. Emigrating, therefore, is a personal decision: “[...] we cannot tell our families that we want to come and cross the water – they would not allow their children to cross the water and come here. Who would allow that? Nobody would allow it, and that is why nobody wants to tell his father that he wants to come here.” (A1.4, bcn4, ref1).

Secondly, while they may usually begin their migration process alone, in the course of the journey it becomes a shared path in which they are accompanied by adults and other young people they meet along the way. In the interviews it was reported that many began their journey alone but met people along the way, while some made the journey accompanied by friends and others travelled with family members, as one interviewee explained:

I came with my mother here, to Barcelona.

You came with your mother?

Yes, and she left me here. I said goodbye... (A1.2, bcn4, ref1).

A similar situation is related by two girls who entered Spain through Melilla, as minors, and who are in Barcelona today:

How did you enter Melilla?

With my ordinary passport, with my mother.

Like Sara?

Yes. And then you go to the police and say, “I have no one. I want to go to the centre for minors”, and that’s that (A1.2, bcn6, ref.2).

The decision to migrate and the migratory routes are some of the shared points. From the interviews conducted with the young migrants, it was also possible to identify other common aspects, such as the reasons for migrating and coming to Barcelona as well as other particularities, such as the experiences undergone during the migratory process.

3.1. *Reasons why young people migrate: conditions in countries of origin*

The reasons that lead young people to migrate are associated with contexts and realities in their countries of origin. In many cases, poverty and lack of opportunities are the main reasons. This reality materialises in a lack of money for daily life, generalised precarious family situations, and a lack of any opportunities or possibilities to improve these situations. The statements of one of the interviewees illustrate this:

Well, in my country... I have not found anything that I can do in my country. There is no work, there is nothing. If I stay in my country until I am older, I will not be able to do anything, I cannot work. That’s why I wanted to leave my country (A1, bcn7, ref1).

This situation is also related by educators, who affirm that there are “children who come from environments where they are fleeing from misery, where they are looking for living opportunities and who already have an education and a cultural level, while others are in a worse situation in the streets” (Bcn11, code6.4, ref2). The contexts of poverty in which interviewees have lived are also evidence of the great socioeconomic inequalities in their countries of origin. This is a reality that young migrants recognise and that drives them to migrate. As an interviewee from Morocco, well aware that the situation in which they lived was not the same for everyone in the country, explains:

Morocco is a country where you can do a million things if you know people and if you have connections and money: you can work, maybe you can do a lot of things without studying. But even if you study in Morocco, if you don't have money, if your parents don't have money and don't have connections, you can study all you want but you won't get anywhere (A1, bcn7, ref1).

Poverty, insecurity and violence are also decisive factors when it comes to migrating. As one of the interviewed girls explains: “[...] I don't say it's that way in Morocco as a whole, but where I live it's a... it's a very dangerous city. I mean, when I was little, I could not go out to play with other children, I could not go shopping alone, a lot of things like that. I mean, they can carry you off there, they can rape you, etcetera, etcetera, you know?” (A1, bcn7, ref1). Daily insecurity is aggravated by historical and current situations, especially in countries in conflict, where violence and insecurity are compounded by war, forcing people to migrate. One of the interviewed educators describes how one boy...

was fleeing from the war [...] He had been here for 5 years already. Now he is 16. He came when he was 11 by plane with a false passport [...] I have heard stories of difficult lives [...] He told me that there had been guns in his house, that for him a gun was like seeing a pen in a house here, that he opened the window of his house and saw people dying and I don't know what else. It was incredible (Bcn4, code4.5, ref.1).

Poverty, socioeconomic inequality, insecurity and violence are realities that educators also recognise. Another educator from a service external to the DGAIA reports that young people who migrate are “people who, well, have gone through traumatic processes, whether it be abuse, social exclusion, poverty, or fleeing from armed conflicts” (Bcn8, code6.4, ref1). In this sense, poverty and insecurity, materialised in situations in which there are threats to one's physical integrity, in which there are no guarantees of individual and collective security, in which violence is a daily occurrence and people live in fear, mean that the possibility of migrating is not so much an option as a necessity, a way out, an attempt to survive.

3.2. *Motivations for migration: seeking a better future*

The lack of possibilities and opportunities within contexts of socioeconomic inequality, in which some people have access to better possibilities and others do not, also drives young people to emigrate to seek better options and possibilities for the future, both for themselves and their families. Helping their families is one of the main motives for migrating, as explained by the young interviewees:

Well, I think the motive is that we want the same thing, to help our families. If you see that your family is suffering to earn what you eat and all the rest, then you realize you are young and that you want to challenge life, to look for a better future, for you and for them.

I came here to help my parents and my family. You know that Morocco is a country that is in a bad situation, you know that there is no work or anything to do, so we all come here to look for a job, to help our families and to get ahead (A1.1, bcn2, ref1).

Concern for the family is a constant element shared by young migrants. The will and interest to help their families to achieve a better life not only motivates the migratory processes they have undertaken but also leads them and their families to make decisions addressed to improving their situation while they are still in their countries of origin. In some cases, they have left school to work. This was the case of one of the interviewees:

I was going (to school), I have done only four years of school. Then, well, with my family problem and everything, my father took me out of school to help him work in the countryside, to help the family and everything. So, that's my reason for leaving my country, to look for a better life, to help my father, because I have seen my father suffering, trying to help the family. So, I don't want to continue that way, to see my father suffering, and that's why I have left, to be able to help him better (A1.1, bcn2, ref2).

These young migrants have clear objectives regarding what to do once they reach Barcelona. They are aware that one of their main motivations for leaving their countries and coming here is to help their families and to achieve a better future. They very clearly state that they have come here to study and to work, understood as strategies that will allow them to improve their lives and that of their families in their countries of origin. "I mean, here, when you think about your family that is there in Morocco while you are here alone, and about why are you here, well, you realize you have come here to study and to work and to improve things" (A1.1, bcn1, ref2).

In addition to the aforementioned causes – poverty, inequality and insecurity – these young migrants share narratives regarding what led them to migrate. The goal of a better future involves helping the family, finding a job, studying and having better options for the future. This is what some of the young interviewees said when asked why they decided to emigrate:

To help my family, to find a good job, to have a good future. That is why we have come here.

To learn more, to look for a job, to help the family, because we have a poor family, that's why we are here, to help the family and all that (A1.1, bcn1, ref1).

These causes are common and the objective is shared: to achieve a better future. In this sense, work and study are the fundamental reasons for migrating: "to study in order to work" (A1.1, bcn4, ref1). In the case of young migrants living on the streets, the possibility of a better future is central, and this is especially so for girls, who find, in their home countries, that in addition to living in situations of poverty and insecurity, with the

need to help their families, they must accept a future that they have not chosen, that is imposed on them by the society in which they live. For these girls, a better future also means being free, independent women and not being under the tutelage of a husband. This is how two of the interviewed girls explained it:

Well, I didn't see any future there. I didn't like being there and staying there so I came here. There is no future in my country.

Also, in Morocco the future for girls is that, when you turn 18, you have to get married and have children. You must not work. So you can see that there is no future. Girls must not work because it looks very ugly. For example, here I can work as a waitress and there's no problem. But in Morocco, if you work as a waitress, you are considered – excuse my language – a whore. That's the way it is... (A1.1, bcn7, ref1).

The educators also identify studying and working as one of the main motivations driving young people to emigrate: “[...] to study.... well, to study and work was like the common thing, wasn't it? The common thing for almost all the kids” (Bcn10, code6.4, ref3). In this respect, obtaining personal documents is important: one needs “[...] papers, to have papers, to have them quickly, and what they want is to work, to look for resources that give them some way to work” (Bcn13, code6.4, ref3). They recognise that in young migrants “[...] who are already 17 or 18 years old, there is a greater obsession to get a job. When they have been here for a year, they need to send money home” (Bcn13, code6.4, ref4). In any case, for “other young people fleeing extreme poverty or contexts of social risk and so on, the motivation is fundamentally work-related” (Bcn8, code6.4, ref4). In this context, studying and working are cross-cutting motivations, which both educators from different centres and fostering services recognise, and which the young people from different countries of origin and ages consider as central elements in their decision to migrate.

The different reasons for migrating are shared. The conditions in the countries of origin – such as poverty, insecurity, inequality and lack of opportunities – and the achievement of a better future, which implies helping their families, studying and working, are common aspects in the stories of young migrants and the educators who work with them. In some cases, some elements outweigh others. There are also other reasons, not necessarily linked to situations of precariousness but rather to an interest and curiosity in learning about other realities and cultures. The story of one of the interviewees illustrates this:

Well, I think that depends on each person, if you're talking about the economic situation or the cultural situation. But each person makes his own decision. Maybe some people decide to leave because of an economic situation, or because they can help their families since the minimum wage is very low in that country, etc., or because they have a different mentality and cannot live together, so they leave the country. I guess it all depends on each person. In my case, it is because of everything. I wanted to leave in order to get to know other cultures and another world (A1.1, bcn3, ref1).

3.3. *Experiences during the migration process*

Migration processes for young people are never easy. These are complex processes fraught with harsh experiences. According to educators, young migrants “[...] have gone through a very complex migratory process, for many days or even months, depending on where they come from; and there is a lot of distrust, a lot of distrust above all, because of the uncertainty of not knowing where they are going and so on” (Bcn8, code4.5, rf7). They say things like this: “[...] I think all of them, in the migratory process, have suffered some kind of abuse, rape, etc. Or they’ve been exposed to drug use as a result of living on the streets” (Bcn5, code4.5, ref.3).

This research corroborates the hardships experienced during the migration process, hardships that have a huge physical and emotional impact on young people. As one of the interviewed educators explains, in some cases they are “[...] kids who arrive malnourished, kids who have survived an extremely arduous migratory process, and who may even have lost family members” (Bcn12, code4.4, ref.5). This makes it difficult for young migrants to explain what their migration process was like, in terms of the experiences they lived through. Access to basic necessities, such as shelter, becomes more difficult, because, as one interviewee explains, “[...] it is not easy to live in the forest, it is difficult. When you migrate, it is difficult, it is not like living at home to be alone in forest at night. And then you always have to be careful to spend very little money, and that is another very difficult aspect.” (A3, bcn4, ref2).

For these young people, talking about their experiences during their journeys means explaining and reliving harrowing situations that they often are unable or unwilling to share. One of the interviewees narrates the hardship of crossing the sea in a dinghy:

When you are on the water,
in the boat,
you don’t see anything, you see only the sea, that’s all.
What were you saying? Sorry, I didn’t hear you.
No, in the boat I came in, we were seven people. We left from Portugal
and then we came across, here to Spain. Then we left Cadiz, passed
through Seville and came here to Barcelona. We were on the sea for three
days (A3, bcn1, ref1).

One of the interviewed educators commented on some of the situations that young migrants have experienced: “He explained to me that he had been walking for three months to get to Melilla, I don’t remember where he came from, but for three months he was walking, three whole months until he finally arrived in Melilla. He got over the fence in Melilla and then he came here” (Bcn4, code4.5, ref.2).

For many young migrants, the migratory journey involves leaving and/or passing through countries in conflict. The route that some young people from sub-Saharan African countries have taken involves cutting through Libya, a country immersed in armed conflict and civil war for over a decade (BBC News Mundo, 2020, January 15). The young migrants are aware of this and of the perils of passing through this territory, as explained by one who crossed Libya during his migratory journey:

Well, it was like one night when the women came, because in Libya, at the time of Gaddafi... Women don’t have the right there to be out in the streets, so they always stay at home. Another thing, for example, is that in Libya you don’t have the right to greet a woman. If it’s not your wife,

you don't have the right to greet a woman with your hand and you don't have the right to look at her face. If you meet a woman, you have to lower your head until she passes by. And another thing is that they grabbed people there, the dark-skinned people, and they took them to jail for no reason. They just grab you and sell you as if you were a slave. That's something that I didn't like at all. It's another very bad thing that I saw. (A3, bcn5, ref1).

Many young migrants experienced complex and difficult personal situations during the migration process. Extremely traumatic situations such as witnessing the death of fellow travellers were related by some of the young migrants living on the streets. Here, one of them recounts how he saw a companion die at sea:

In each kayak there was room for two people and the Navy stopped them and two of the six people drowned.

No, he did not know how to swim. He says that it was not only because they couldn't swim, however, but also because the sea was too rough.

He says that what happened is that they had planned to tie up all three kayaks or something like that, but they didn't manage to do it. Their kayak went straight and didn't flip over, and they just got stopped by the Navy. They haven't heard anything about one of the kayaks, but they know that while the other kayak was moving away from theirs, it turned over and since the sea was very rough, they drowned.

The plan did not work (A3, bcn7, ref1).

A similar situation is related by another interviewee, who witnessed the death of a companion while attempting to climb over the border fence to enter Spain.

He broke his arm attempting to climb over the fence and then, with the cold, the street below and his broken arm... He says that when they are at the top of the fence, all the people below tell them to get down...

The police?

The police, and since they don't come down, they shoot them with ...**Rubber bullets?**

No, some substance. They don't know what it is exactly, but it's a harmful substance.

And they throw stones too.

And then, with the substance, he ended up falling to the ground.

It was like a spray?

Yes, it's like a machine that makes a kind of spray. Under pressure. They also used water to hurt the people. It causes a pain like an electric shock (A3, bcn7, ref3).

One of the interviewed educators commented: "They are children who have had experiences that we cannot even imagine. They have gone through situations that I think would be very difficult for an adult mind to cope with, and much more difficult for a mind that is in the process of developing" (Bcn14, code6.4, ref3).

Young migrants are aware of the difficulties and dangers of the journey and are even aware that there is a risk of dying along the way. This is how one of them describes it: "Well, I had friends here in Spain, and in France and Germany, and when I told them

about my plans so that they could give me some suggestions, they told me, well, you can come to Europe but it's a very difficult journey and you may even lose your life [...]" (A3, bcn2, ref1).

While not all of these young people have followed the same route, they all had to overcome great adversity, perilous situations and enormous changes such as leaving their homes, hunger, or meeting people who were not always good to them. With resignation, they believe that this type of situation is not going to change. These are journeys that many others have made before them and that, possibly, many more will make in the future. The treacherous conditions, the dangers and the adversities that they have had to face will continue to exist. This is how they put it:

I can tell you that the path that everyone knows, the path of the migrant, is not very easy, it is not easy at all. As you can imagine, there are a lot of bad people on the way, there are big changes, you go hungry, a lot of things happen. It is very difficult, very difficult. If I am here and my brother or cousin tells me he wants to come to Spain, I can tell what is going to happen, it is what it is and it's all true, it will never change, it will never change. Because a lot of things happen out there; things don't happen because you tell them out loud, really. It is very difficult (A3, bcn2, ref2).

Despite the tremendous difficulties they have encountered along the way, these young migrants also recognise the value of the cultural and personal learning process that has made them stronger. One interviewee comments that "I study new things. For example, when I was in Ghana, I was a student and I studied on paper, but now I have seen things with my eyes... the sea, mountains, and desert. I lived for many months without hardly eating, walking many kilometres, and all the time I learned a lot, and now I am stronger than before." (A3, bcn1, ref1). These migrants are resilient young people who recognise the valuable lessons learned through such an arduous experience: "In the beginning, yes. In the beginning, when you don't have papers or anybody to help you, when you don't know the language or how to communicate with people, everything is difficult. But the good thing is that you quickly start to learn new things..." (A3, bcn2, ref1).

Furthermore, one of the fundamental positive aspects of the migratory process is the solidarity and mutual help experienced during the journey. These young migrants recognise the importance of and need for this mutual help, highlighting that: "It depends: if you have papers for everything, you don't need anyone's help. If you have worked before and have money, you can go farther, but if you have nothing, you can't do it alone" (A3, bcn2, ref1). They themselves point out that "there is empathy among travellers and solidarity too, and help, because we help each other a lot" (A3, bcn5, ref1). Lastly, not everyone enters Spain in the same way. Most of the interviewed young people entered Spain from Morocco, either by crossing the sea in a dinghy or hiding in a boat, or by land, climbing over the border fence or hiding under a truck, to reach Ceuta or Melilla. From there, it can take between 3 and 6 months to reach Barcelona, often passing through different cities such as Malaga, Granada, Cadiz, Cordoba, Seville, and Madrid, among others.

4. Conclusions and discussion

The migration process begins with the decision to leave which, as noted above, is not usually shared with families. However, this is not a decision alien to the societies they leave behind. There is a tradition (López-Riello, 2011; Auger-Voyer et al., 2014) and a positive view of migration in the countries of origin (Perazzo & Zuppiroli, 2018), which is probably the first factor influencing young people's decision to migrate, even before they consciously make the decision (López-Riello, 2011).

One of the reasons for migrating identified during the interviews was the conditions in the countries of origin such as poverty, economic inequality, lack of opportunities, insecurity and violence. These could be considered as common and cross-cutting causes (Marco, 2015). They emerge as determining factors in the migration processes in the interviews conducted and various research papers cite the situations in the countries of origin as the reasons driving migration, including such things as poverty and lack of opportunities, violence and governance problems, situations of precariousness and failure to cover basic needs (Mohamed-Abderrahman et al., 2018; Perazzo & Zuppiroli, 2018; Menjívar & Perreira, 2017; López-Riello, 2011, among others). Torrado (2018) states that the global situation and the specific economic situation in the country of origin as well as more individual aspects must be considered when exploring the causes driving young migrants to migrate.

At the same time, the search for a better future also emerges as a central motive for migrating. A better future is understood as the possibility of helping out their families back home in their countries of origin and, therefore, they need to study and to work. Several investigations speak of the migration of unaccompanied minors as a family strategy, often encouraged by the families themselves (Menjívar & Perreira, 2017; Giral, 2015; Marco, 2015; Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). However, in our interviewees, the decision was an individual and personal one only rarely shared within the family nucleus.

A desire to study and get a good job is also central. Young migrants state that in order to gain better job opportunities, they must study. Unlike other research in which education does not appear as an explicit reason, identifying a lack of motivation to study (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014), in the interviews that we conducted, training and studying are reported to be a major motivation because they are perceived as necessary to achieve a better future.

In relation to the experiences during the migratory journey, there seems to be a consensus regarding the difficulties and hardships experienced during the ordeal. Although often painful for the young migrants to recount, these experiences should be taken into consideration given the effects and sequels they can have, particularly on an emotional level (Perazzo & Zuppiroli, 2018; O'Toole et al., 2017).

Despite the difficulties, it is also important to highlight the positive aspects identified by the young migrants regarding their migratory journeys, especially those aspects associated with a culture of peace, such as solidarity, empathy, accompanying and helping each other, as well as personal learning and growth (Sánchez et al., 2018).

Finally, entry into Spain, whether by sea or land, is often done in extremely dangerous ways, such as under a truck, on ferries or by climbing over the border fence in Ceuta or Melilla. These practices are common and have been noted by other researchers (Perazzo & Zuppiroli, 2018; Marco, 2015). Entering Spain is just one more stage in the migration process, after which the young migrants travel through different cities before reaching,

in this case, Barcelona, where they begin the fostering process or, failing that, they begin life on the city's streets. The fostering process is not considered within the scope of this article. It is duly addressed in other publications (Vilà et al., 2021; Schmidlin et al., 2020; Vilà et al., 2020, among others) and in the research hosting this article, and it constitutes a pivotal part of the migratory process that these young migrants experience.

The migration process is becoming a key focal point as an understanding of the motivations driving these young people to leave their countries of origin and to come to Europe is imperative to comprehend their needs and to offer them a better reception. Marco (2015) contends that while there are common causes in the situations in the countries of origin, each young migrant has a personal, social and family reality that interacts with the general contexts when making the decision to migrate, and this must be considered to avoid the risk of creating a homogenising discourse for these extremely diverse individuals, each with his or her own personal needs and expectations.

At this point, we should also consider the limits of the study. Young migrants began arriving on our shores over a decade ago when the situation was very different, just as they will continue to do in the future with yet another very different scenario. Their motivations respond to the socioeconomic situations in their countries of origin, and also to their particular contexts. While some common aspects persist over time, such as certain conditions in the countries of origin (poverty, socioeconomic inequality, insecurity and violence), social and personal realities change. Social and political realities in both the countries of origin and of arrival may change, and family and personal situations too.

Furthermore, the stories collected correspond to young people who have emigrated in recent years, some of whom have been in Barcelona for only a short time, and the interviews were conducted in 2020 during the pandemic. Hence, the results must be framed within certain spatial and temporal limits.

These same limits are those that in turn highlight, and allow us to visualise, other possible lines of research. We could, for example, explore continuities and changes in post-pandemic migration processes. Likewise, young migrants today have more knowledge and information than ever before. They are aware of the dangers and of the difficulties they will encounter upon arrival. Will this affect the migration project of other young people in the future?

Finally, although migratory journeys can be extremely arduous, these young people have also been able to recognise some positive aspects such as solidarity, becoming stronger, helping each other and personal growth. Learning more about and highlighting these positive experiences may serve to alter how we, as receiving societies, view this migration process, and to lead us to make greater efforts with respect to the inclusion of these young people who leave their countries in search of a better future.

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6. Notes

1. In Spanish, the acronym MENA is a strongly stigmatised (Gómez-Quintero et al., 2020; Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya, 2019; Rivas & Tarragona, 2018), which is why we have avoided it and refer to this population as “unaccompanied young migrants” (Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya, 2019).

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