

Border and Journey Experience of Unaccompanied Children Under International Protection in Turkey¹

Türkiye’de Bulunan Uluslararası Koruma Altındaki Refakatsiz Çocukların Sınır ve Yolculuk Deneyimleri

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research is to investigate the border and journey experiences of unaccompanied children under international protection in Turkey. Unaccompanied children migrate on similar routes with different or similar motivations. They migrate with different people on these journeys. These journeys pose different dangers and risks from the beginning to the end. Therefore, the research focuses on the process from the beginning of the migration of unaccompanied children to their arrival in Turkey. This process is examined through the lenses of the conceptual framework of mixed migration.

In order to conduct the research, a semi-structured in-depth interview is employed as a research method, while the snowball method was utilized to reach the ex-minors. In total, 14 people were interviewed. Of these, 8 are ex-minors (currently over 18 years old but previously unaccompanied children). 5 of them are those working with unaccompanied children in the field of civil society. One person works in migration management.

Unaccompanied children generally migrate irregularly. Most of them are men. Their ages at the time of their arrival to Turkey are differs between 11-17, but most of them are 15-17. Their motivations are different from each other. The reasons are economic, war, conflict, family strategy, and career development. The routes that they use are similar. Unaccompanied children face risks such as sexual and physical violence, hunger, deprivation of hygiene, long walks, obscurity, detention and death during their migration journey and at the border.

Keywords: International Protection, Mixed Migration, Turkey, Unaccompanied Children

¹ This article was produced from the section of Journey and Border Experiences of Unaccompanied Children in Turkey as a part of the doctoral thesis titled "Being an Unaccompanied Child in Forced Migration: Samples of Turkey and Italy" written by author.

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Özet:

Bu araştırmanın amacı, Türkiye'de uluslararası koruma altındaki refakatsiz çocukların sınır ve yolculuk deneyimlerini araştırmaktır. Refakatsiz çocuklar, farklı veya benzer motivasyonlarla benzer rotalarda göç etmektedir. Bu yolculuklarda farklı insanlarla birlikte etmekte ve bu yolculukların başından sonuna kadar farklı tehlikeler ve risklerle karşılaşmaktadırlar. Bu nedenle araştırma, refakatsiz çocukların hareketliliğinin başlangıcından Türkiye'ye varışlarına kadar olan sürece odaklanmaktadır. Bu süreç karma göç kavramı etrafında incelenmektedir.

Araştırmada 14 kişiyle mülakat gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bunlardan 8'i ex-minor'lardır (şu anda 18 yaşını tamamlamış olan ancak önceden refakatsiz çocuk statüsünde olanlar). 5'i sivil toplum alanında refakatsiz çocuklarla çalışandır. 1 kişi de göç idaresinde çalışmaktadır. Yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşme kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada ex-minor'lara ulaşmak için kartopu örneklem yöntemi tercih edilmiştir.

Refakatsiz çocuklar genellikle düzensiz göç etmektedir. Çoğunluğu erkektir. Türkiye'ye geliş yaşları 11-17 arasındadır, ancak yoğunluk 15-17'dir. Geliş motivasyonları birbirinden farklıdır. Nedenler cinsel ve fiziksel şiddetten kaçma, ağır yoksulluktan kurtulma, savaş, çatışma, aile stratejisi, kariyer gelişimi olabilmektedir. Kullandıkları rotalar benzerdir. Refakatsiz çocuklar yolculuklarında ve sınırı geçerken cinsel ve fiziksel şiddet, açlık, hijyenden yoksunluk, uzun yürüyüşler, bilinmezlik, gözaltı ve göç ölüm gibi risklerle karşı karşıya kalmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karma Göç, Refakatsiz Çocuklar, Türkiye, Uluslararası Koruma

Atf için (how to cite):

A.Kerem, A., (2022). Border and Journey Experience of Unaccompanied Children Under International Protection in Turkey Fenerbahçe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi 2022;2(2), 286-302

1.Introduction

We are passing through a period in which irregular migration is discussed more loudly, and tried to be controlled and securitized. Strict border and immigration policies are observed in this period when those who do not come from regular routes including the migration of asylum seekers are perceived negatively, and their existence is problematic. At least death of 37 people tried to cross from Morocco to Spain as a result of being beaten at the border (Middleton, 2022), bad conditions for people trying to cross from Belarus to Poland, and the death of more than 10 people, including a 1.5-year-old baby (Tondo, 2021), winter conditions are examples of the consequences of hardening. As the Belarusian-Polish example shows, it is not only adults who are affected. Besides, Baby Aylan's body that hit the Aegean coast is still remembered. Children are also affected by this process as well. On the other hand, forcibly displaced persons in Ukraine have access to temporary protection in EU countries. This is proof that migration is a context-dependent phenomenon. The countries of origin of the immigrants or asylum seekers, their reasons, and the time of their migration are important factors in determining the approach of the countries.

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In such a period, the number of forcibly displaced persons exceeded 100 million. (UNHCR, 2022a) Considering the forced migration that crosses national borders, the number is approximately 32 million, including refugees and asylum seekers. (UNHCR, 2022b) Moreover, it is stated that the number may increase radically and reach 200 million in 2050 due to the climate crisis. (Brown, 2008, p. 9) These data also prove that migration is not a temporary phenomenon. Besides, a considerable part of the people who migrated or were forcibly displaced are also children. Therefore, the forcibly displaced or migrating includes not only adults but also children. According to UNICEF, 36.5 million children have been forcibly displaced worldwide (Unicef, 2022), of which approximately 11 million have gained refugee status, and 20 million have migrated across national borders. While 1 out of every 8 children in the world is an immigrant, one out of every 200 children is a refugee. (Garin et al., n.d.; Unicef, 2022) Moreover, refugee children also include children who have to migrate unaccompanied. Examples of unaccompanied children are those who had to immigrate alone from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria and various African countries to Europe (EC & EMN, 2018, pp. 6–7) or Turkey, and children who were left unaccompanied as a result of their family members being arrested while trying to cross the border. (EC & EMN, 2018; Save the Children et al., 2009) Although the exact number of unaccompanied refugee children are not known worldwide, according to UNHCR, there were 138,600 unaccompanied refugee children as of 2018. (UNHCR, 2018) From 2011 to 2021, according to the European Commission (EC, 2022), unaccompanied children applicants accounted for an average of 15.3% of the total number of children applying for international protection for the first time and the number of children applying for international protection to the European Union for the first time is 166,760 in 2021. On average, it can be estimated that there are around 25 thousand unaccompanied children in 2021, but since the number of unaccompanied children under international protection in Turkey is not known clearly, the number is likely to be much higher globally.

In this study, the border and journey experiences of unaccompanied children under international protection in Turkey are examined. Therefore, the research investigates the process from the arrival of unaccompanied children to Turkey from leaving their home country. Thus, research focuses on only the reasons of unaccompanied children and their border and journey experiences. While doing this review, first the conceptual framework of the study will be revealed. In light of the concepts of mixed migration and childhood, the journey and border experiences of unaccompanied children are examined in depth. While these concepts are being discussed, it will be discussed why the concept of mixed migration can be useful in explaining this mobility. Then, the concept of unaccompaniment and how the child is handled as an agent will be expressed. The research perceives the child as an active agent, not as a passive receiver as explained below. Then the methodological approach will be included. Those who were previously unaccompanied children called ex-minor and are currently over 18 years old have been reached. Thus, they were ensured to exist as active subject in the study. Finally, field findings will be shared and discussed within the framework of concepts.

2. Conceptual Framework: Mixed Migration and Agency of Children

As mentioned, the concept of mixed migration is used in this study. Mixed migration focuses on people on the move which means crossing the border and arriving in another country. “*Mixed migration is a relatively new term – in wider usage in the last decade – which seeks to capture the intertwined and multifaceted drivers of movement of all people, regardless of status.*”(Mixed Migration Centre, 2019) It

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is defined as “cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities” (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019) according to the Mixed Migration Centre. As can be understood from the definition, only forced migration is not mentioned. This is one of the reasons why it is called mixed migration.

The concept is based on the “mixing of migrants' motivations and mixing in mobility”. (Oelgemöller, 2021, p. 251) Except for the Mixed Migration Centre, IOM states that it refers to the mobility of those who use the same migration routes and prefer the same modes of transport. (IOM, 2019) UNHCR, on the other hand, prefers to use the concept of mixed movement. (UNHCR, 2022) But whatever concept one looks at, the focus is on the emphasis on the human in mobility. The idea of mixed migration consists of two components for Oelgemöller: “mixed in mobility” and “mixed in motivations”. The first focuses on “focusing on the fact that people, whether forced or not, move together in space after having left and before arriving or being allocated a status based on some or other positive (legal) criteria”. (Oelgemöller, 2021, p. 255) This expression refers to the mixed motivations of migrants who migrate for different reasons on the migration route. The second is related to the “motivation to participate in mobility”. Because “most people who move do so because of a mix of being compelled and having the choice to move”. (Oelgemöller, 2021, p. 250) Inclusion of people with mixed motivations means that it includes “refugees and asylum seekers fleeing war and persecution, and migrants seeking better lives and opportunities (...) but migrants who left their home countries voluntarily may also be fleeing situations of insecurity, while refugees are also seeking better lives and opportunities.” (Horwood et al., 2018, p. 179)

Moreover, for three key reasons, mixed migration—as opposed to investigating groups in migratory flows individually a useful optic through which to analyse current human mobility patterns: (*Mixed Migration Centre, 2022*)

It describes people as they are moving— or in transit— for however long the journey lasts. The term cannot be applied to people before they have left their place of origin, just as it cannot be applied to those who have arrived and settled at a point of destination.

It allows for additional protections for those on the move, as people irrespective of status, face similar risks and vulnerabilities from the same causes and/or perpetrators.

It recognizes that the drivers of movement—for both refugees and migrants—are diverse, multi-dimensional, often intertwined and influence each other.

In addition, people with different motivations at the beginning of their migration journey can change their migration strategies in the flow with the new information they have acquired and heard throughout the journey. For example, an unaccompanied child who has started to migrate for economic reasons can apply for international protection in the country he/she goes to when he/she learns that he/she can be taken under international protection. It should be noted that while mixed migration emphasizes cross-border journeys or being on the move, it does not deal with the reasons in the country of origin and the process after arrival in the destination country. For these reasons, the concept of mixed migration is a fruitful one for understanding and explaining the journey and border experiences of unaccompanied children. Therefore, one of the preferred concepts in this article is mixed migration.

One of the important concepts for this article is the concept of unaccompaniment. Although there is no common definition of unaccompanied children under international protection by all states, the definitions converge at some points. It is observed that there is a consensus on the point of expressing the situation of the child coming to the target country separately from his/her parents or legal guardians. In Turkey, it is defined by law as “a child who arrives in Turkey without the accompaniment of an adult responsible for him/her by law or custom, or remains unaccompanied after entering Turkey, unless he/she is taken into the effective care of a responsible person”. (Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu, 2013, s.v. 3/1/m)

Finally, the approach to the child, specifically the unaccompanied children, is important. There is a rhetoric that generally establishes childhood over adulthood in research and literature on children who experience forced or mixed migration. The approach that the child is an innocent, passive object dependent on the adult ignores the subjectivity and individuality of the child. “In combination with a predominant view of adults as the drivers of migration, this has led to an image of children as dependent and dependants, as victims, or as simply not part of the main picture at all.” (Seeberg & Goździak, 2016, pp. 6–7) However, children are both affected by and affect the processes as active agents. The agency of this feature is basically based on the discussion of whether the child is "becoming" or "being". Those who claim to be "becoming" state that children are individuals and need adults, while those who claim to be "being" argue that children are individuals. (Seeberg, 2016)

The subjectivity debate is also meaningful in the phenomenon of migration, and it affects the positioning of children among immigrants and how childhood is handled in the migration literature. In this study, the subjectivity of the child is highlighted. In this context, concepts such as refugee child, child under international protection, in which the child is the subject, will be used instead of concepts such as child refugee, child migrant, where the child is considered as an adjective, that is, as an element that defines another word, but the subject is migration categories. It is accepted that they are both "becoming" and "being" at the same time. Because children – specifically unaccompanied children – are active agents who experience the process and face risks on the one hand, and on the other hand, they are more vulnerable to dangers and need protection due to their age. This is the reason why they are taken under state protection when they come to the countries. In summary, while the journey and border experiences of unaccompanied children are examined in the context of the concept of mixed migration, their agency is accepted.

3. Methodology

Field research was carried out between December 2020 and July 2022. Unaccompanied children under international protection were preferred as the unit of analysis and therefore unaccompanied children under temporary protection were excluded from the scope of the study. The backbone of the research is the semi-structured in-depth interview method. However, the research is based on:

- a. Literature and Database Search: National and international literature on unaccompanied childhood and unaccompanied children under international protection were searched and international, national, regional and local reports were examined. At this point, academic databases, relevant government, local authorities and NGO reports, journals, books and posts on related digital platforms were scanned. As a result of the research, the acquired knowledge

and data were added to the existing knowledge and used in the scientific interpretation of the interview.

- b. Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview: This type of interview is a type that allows understanding and examining the researched agent in depth, and information was gathered by interviewing face-to-face or through online platforms with mostly open-ended questions. b. Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview: This type of interview is a type that gives the opportunity to understand and examine the researched subject in depth, and information was gathered by interviewing face-to-face or through online platforms with mostly open-ended questions. For this purpose, interviews were conducted with ex-minors, who were previously under international protection in Turkey and currently over the age of 18, NGO employee working with ex-minors, experts in the field, and actors within the institutional structure of international protection.

Although the unit of analysis of the research is ex-minors in Turkey, the inclusion of non-governmental workers and experts in the field is required to collect secondary data. Because children may have difficulties in understanding the migration process, which can be quite complex. In addition, since qualitative research was conducted, the results are not representative. The opinions of civil society workers and experts are also meaningful in reaching a more holistic information.

Since the best interests of the child were taken into consideration, not all questions were asked openly to the children/ex-minors. It is above everything not to secondarily traumatize the child who has already completed a risky journey and experienced certain traumas. Therefore, the questions asked to the children were reviewed and finalized by a psychologist working in the field of unaccompanied children. The collection of secondary data is primarily for the purpose of obtaining other information that cannot be obtained from children.

The details of the interviewees are shown in the table below. 8 out of 14 people in Turkey are ex-minors who were previously under international protection, 5 of them are civil society workers and 1 is from the Directorate of Migration Management.

Table 1: List of Participants Interviewed in Turkey

Participant	Code Name	Sexuality	Age	Institution	Duty	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Unaccompanied Children - 1	T-UAC1	Male	20	N/A	N/A	Online	2.05.2021
Unaccompanied Children - 2	T-UAC2	Male	21	N/A	N/A	Online	13.05.2021
Unaccompanied Children - 3	T-UAC3	Male	22	N/A	N/A	Online	13.05.2021
Unaccompanied Children - 4	T-UAC4	Male	22	N/A	N/A	Online	19.05.2021

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Unaccompanied Children - 5	T-UAC5	Male	25	N/A	N/A	Online	21.05.2021
Unaccompanied Children - 6	T-UAC6	Male	19	N/A	N/A	Online	13.06.2021
Unaccompanied Children - 7	T-UAC7	Male	18	N/A	N/A	Online	13.06.2021
Unaccompanied Children – 8	T-UAC8	Male	18	N/A	N/A	Online	13.06.2021
NGO Employee – 1	T-NGO1	Female	N/A	SGDD / ASAM	Psychologist	Online	23.04.2021
NGO Employee - 2	T-NGO2	Female	N/A	Mavi Kalem	Coordinator.	Online	7.02.2022
NGO Employee - 3	T- NGO 3	Female	N/A	SGDD / ASAM	Psychologist	Online	27.05.2021
NGO Employee - 4	T- NGO 4	Female	N/A	İKGV	Field Worker	Online	29.05.2021
NGO Employee - 5	T- NGO 5	Male	N/A	SGDD / ASAM	Social Worker	Phone	24.05.2021
Government Institution	T-G1	Male	N/A	Provincial Dir. of Mig. Management	Expert	Face to Face	15.02.2022

The snowball method was preferred when finding the sample to reach the ex-minors. The reason why the snowball method is preferred is that the children found through certain institutions may eventually be exist as a result of the preferences of the people in that institution, and therefore carry the risk of being included in the research by passing certain elimination criteria of institution. In order to minimize this risk, ex-minors in Turkey were accessed by entering a network. It took about a year and a half to enter this network, to establish a bond of trust by spending time with the children, and to create an environment where ex-minors can safely open themselves to the researcher and answer questions. Considering the delicate situation of the ex-minors and other vulnerable groups, spending enough time with target group to establish bond of trust is critical. It also must be taken into consideration that specific necessities of the target group may vary to establish such a bond. Therefore, interviews were conducted after establishing a bond of trust.

One of the most challenging aspects of the research was the interview process, since the target group is such a sensitive group that interviewer must be careful. For this reason, psychologists working in the

field of unaccompanied children were consulted by the researcher before and during the fieldwork. Their feedback was used to develop the approach to the interviewees and the wording of questions. Data from unaccompanied children/ex-minors and other participants were analysed in the context of children's migration journey and border experiences.

4. Journey and Border Experiences of Unaccompanied Children

4.1. General Profiles of Unaccompanied Children under International Protection and Their Reasons to Migrate

There is no official data on how many unaccompanied children with international protection applications or status there are in Turkey. Yet, when we look at the profiles of the participant ex-minors (who were previously unaccompanied children and are now over the age of 18) contacted and interviewed in the research – which is not representative of the general population and reflects the reality reached in the research field – their current ages are between 19-25.

Table 2: Ex-minor Participators' Profiles

Participants	Age	Year of Arrival	Country of Origin	The Age of Time of Their Arrival
T-UAC1	21	2018	Iran	17
T- UAC2	21	2017	Afghanistan	16
T- UAC3	22	2016	Iran	16
T- UAC4	23	2016	Iran (Afghan)	17
T- UAC5	25	2014	Afghanistan	17
T- UAC6	20	2017	Pakistan (Afghan)	15
T- UAC7	19	2017	Afghanistan	14
T- UAC8	19	2019	Afghanistan	16

The age of the participants at the time of their migration was between 14-17. They are mostly between the ages of 16-17. The average age at the time of their arrival is 16. This may be due to the fact that they are legally in the last stage of their childhood and there is limited time to be involved in the current legal processes subject to children. Expert opinions also show that the age range is 11-17. (T-NGO4) Although they came from and were raised in Iran and Pakistan respectively, two of the Ex-minor participants (T-UAC4 and T-UAC6) are originally from Afghanistan. The countries that unaccompanied children come from are generally Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq:

“Unaccompanied children are from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria and Iraq. Mostly from Iran and Afghanistan. They are predominantly from Afghanistan. (T-NGO3)”

“I have been active in the field for 5 years. I was on the ground for 2 years. All the unaccompanied children I saw were boys. I have never met girls. They mostly live with older brothers, especially in

the Zeytinburnu region. This is the reason why we proposed the child protection project in 2017. As for nationalities, they are usually from Afghan and Turkic states. (T-NGO2)”

“When we look at the general profile, we encountered mostly Syrian and Afghan children. These groups were both under temporary protection and international protection. However, I mostly worked with international protection. But when I was in Adana, I had the opportunity to work with temporary protection, mostly Syrians, refugees from Syria. We also worked with LGBTI members and unaccompanied children in Eskişehir. Well, unaccompanied children usually come from Syria and Afghanistan, there are also from Iran, but not so many from Iran. They were mostly from Afghanistan and Syria. (T-NGO5)”

The motivations and reasons for the arrival of unaccompanied children are also important. And these reasons for the arrival of ex-minors vary according to their country of origin. Among the reasons that prominent are the desire to live a better life and to get rid of severe poverty.

“... it was harder to live there than here. You know, we thought, let's go to Turkey, make our life simpler, be exist in somewhere, go to school or something... (T-UAC4, Iran, 23 years old)”

“I came from Iran. We didn't have much of a life. We were under poverty. (T-AC1, Iran, 21 years old)”

Another reason is to pursue a career of individual dreams and goals. Some children are coming in order to continue their career especially if they are interested in sports such as football or martial arts. The first prominent driving motivations are economic such as getting a better life, making a career or getting out of poverty. Continuing education life is also among the reasons stated by the participants. Interrupted education life in their country of origin and perception towards children as adults who need to work led them to leave their hometowns:

“It is a country with very low welfare. Not everyone has the opportunity to educate there. In general, most children do not attend high school. When they reach the age of 16-15, they have to work. We had a similar situation. I couldn't continue my education after I finished primary school. I was already working. It was half-day school, half-day work. Still, we were fine. Most people there still go to work rather than school at a young age. (T-UAC6, Pakistan, 20 years old)”

However, another participant stated that he was unaccompanied in Iran, the country he lived in before and that he did not receive support from any parent or family member, and stated that the life he lived in Iran was not much different. Therefore, being unaccompanied in the country of origin can also be one of the factors that provide the necessary motivation to go on an alone journey. Another important determinant is that they are excluded from the country they come from, even if they are not accompanied, and they are left alone and without moral support.

Among the prominent reasons, war is the most radical and dangerous one:

“Ours was very instant. The war broke out and after that, my father panicked. The war was awful. Maybe you've heard of it or you haven't. Our city is not developed at all. They don't use social media much. Facebook exists, and no one cares. Let me share something that has been a war so that people can see it, they are not interested. So war breaks out and people die. Everyone is used to it. This is how it is for us. There were several wars, and after the last war, my father could not stand it anymore (T-UAC7, Afghanistan, 19 years old)”

Other reasons include the fact that unaccompanied children have to send money to their hometown if they come with a family strategy as well as war, violence, and political reasons:

“The reasons for coming are different. Anxiety, and feeling of belonging can be the reasons. Actually, it is not. Sexual abuse, harassment, rape, political reasons, domestic violence, traumas, not feel belonging to society, usually this way. Economic reasons... Generally economic reasons for Afghan nationals, and political reasons for Iranian nationals. (T-NGO3)”

“Children are already exposed to violence, they are struggling with poverty. Most of them have no parents, they are on the streets. (T-NGO1)”

Children may migrate due to the problems they experience with the family or as a result of the family strategy. Here, the first motive is that children are sent to their families with the duty of sending money, the second is the family helping the child to protect the child and sending them alone, the third is the disagreement with the family, and the last is the idea of family reunification:

“...I know the thing, it's not about being unaccompanied. This is one of the patterns. I need to send money to my mom and dad. We hear this from a child who lives with his aunt and uncle, and from young people over the age of 18. Typical thing. (T-NGO2)”

“Sometimes he has conflicts with his family. It could be religion, or his family feels threatened there because of the Taliban. Let's take the example of Afghanistan. They direct the children to Iran first. Since there is already a border, you can commute by minibus. At the very least, families can send them to protect the children so that they are not harmed. (T-NGO4)”

“... if their families are alive, their families send their children to another country and then request for family reunification. I am giving an example, they are looking at Afghanistan, you know, there is no future here. They send their children to Iran first, they come to Turkey via Iran (T-NGO5)”

4.2. Journey and Border Experiences of Unaccompanied Children under International Protection

Unaccompanied children mostly prefer irregular migration routes with irregular migrants. (ECRE & AIDA, 2018; Kuschminder et al., 2015) Due to its nature, irregular migration involves risks and difficulties such as illegal entry to the country's territory, long walks, death and violence, and uncertainties. There are similarities and differences between what happened while crossing the border and after crossing the border. For example, while you may have to walk for a long time to cross the border and apply for international protection after crossing the border, you may be caught by law enforcement officers after crossing the border. In this section, the journeys of unaccompanied children and the details of their journey, their border experiences, the risks they face during the process, and the risks they are exposed to after crossing the border are examined.

Since unaccompanied children generally prefer irregular migration, they mostly enter Turkey from the eastern region of Turkey. However, there are also those who can enter the country legally, albeit very few: *“They can come illegally, they can enter with a passport through Istanbul. There are those who come through Istanbul legally and illegally.” (T-NGO3)”*

Being involved in an irregular migration means that they are on the move with people who have migrated for different reasons including economic, educational or asylum. This helps them acquire information by engaging them within a network. All of the unaccompanied children participating in the study came from irregular ways. Although the route they follow changes according to the country they come from, their last two destinations are Iran and Turkey. Those coming from countries such as Afghanistan or Pakistan enter Turkey from the Doğu Beyazıt region by passing through Iran, while those in Iran enter from Doğu

Beyazıt and its vicinity, and those in other border countries enter through crossing points where one can proceed irregularly.

Their attempts are not always successful the first time, and thus children sometimes try several times which takes a long time:

“We came from Doğu Beyazıt illegally, we were on the road for 3 days. While we were on the road for 3 days, we were at the border for 3 days. So frankly, the Iranian police were sent back to Turkey, and Turkey were sent back to Iran, so we experienced this situation 5-6 times. The Turkish police were sending them back to Iran, and the Iranian police sent them back to Turkey again because we were Afghans. (T-UAC4, Afghanistan, 23 years old)”

The reciprocal pushbacks by the law enforcement officers of border countries result in dangers and uncertainty, while they also make children stuck between the two countries. In addition, harsh and violent behaviours of law enforcement officers also pose a risk to children.

The risks of the journey itself have been already explained. When unaccompanied children start their migration journey, they take a long and impossible journey. At this point, it should not be forgotten that those taking the dangerous routes are children and their ages were between 11-17 at the time of their arrival. They have been going through a tiring and dangerous process in which they have to walk for long periods of time:

While we were coming illegally from Iran to Turkey, we stayed on the road for 2 weeks. For example, we had difficulties on the roads, we walked a lot, really a lot. For example, we walked for almost 30 hours continuously (T-UAC6, Pakistan, 20 years old)

I came from the land border. I came on foot. ... 1 week ... I came from Afghanistan to Iran and to Turkey. I have spent 1 month on the road. (T-UAC2, Afghanistan, 21 years old)

I came illegally. I came on foot. I was on the road for about a week. I was also young. We had difficulties on the way, of course, it was difficult. I walked for about 5 days (T-UAC3, Iran, 22 years old)

However, not all children had to walk for long periods of time, and there were also those who came by vehicle. In addition, unaccompanied children migrate alone, with siblings, friends or families on their journeys. The situation that needs attention here is that children who start the journey with their families lose their families on the road due to various reasons including death, deportation or arrest, and they are left unaccompanied:

I came from the land border; I came illegally from Doğu Beyazıt. I was coming with my parents, actually, I wasn't alone. You may know, the roads are very difficult. We weren't the only ones there, we were crowded, there were a lot of people. Sometimes you change cars on the road, you take another car. Everyone gets in the car. It's not normal for the car to come and pick you up. Everyone is running and jumping in the car. I left there with my parents. I had a cousin, he also had parents and siblings. I and my cousin got in another car. Our families got into different cars. They must have been caught by the police. I don't know exactly. I and my cousin passed through Iran from Afghanistan. From there, we came to Turkey from Iran. We applied to the UN here, and we went there... I mean, because the man who brought us talked to my father, and my father said, you take them. Do not wait for us, ... you take them, if we come, we can come later. After that, we came to Istanbul, I called my father and talked to him. He said they could not come, and the Iranian police

caught them and deported them. They have returned to Afghanistan. (T-UAC7, Afghanistan, 19 years old)

Children who start their journey without their parents or legal guardians, migrate alone, either with their friends or siblings.

Whether children migrate alone, with friends or with siblings, they inevitably have to deal with smugglers on their journey. The smugglers' pressure to act quickly during the journey poses a risk for children since they do not take into account the age or health status of the immigrant children, and because it involves long walks as it is an irregular migration. The risks during the journey involve not only the period before or when crossing the border, but also the period following their arrival at their destination. These include different forms of violence, death, human smuggling, human trafficking, long marches, administrative detention while crossing the border, poor housing conditions, malnutrition and detention:

So there was no water, no bread, properly. We even came to the house of the man who brought us after that. It was tough there too. There were many people from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan who were refugees. Living in that environment... I'm just starting a new life. Now I have to get used to it... There was no proper bread, and no meals, we were eating one meal a day. Like that. (T-UAC3, Iran, 22 years old)

In addition to these experiences, violence, physical and sexual violence and forced prostitution of children were also observed. Such incidents happen on the migration route before or after migration. Sexual violence might be also another reason why children migrate unaccompanied: *"Also, children are exposed to sexual harassment and rape until they arrive, this is the common story for most of them. From the family members, their uncle, father, neighbour, cousin or brother..."* (T-NGO1)

Violence is frequently observed during the journey with smugglers. Failure to keep up with the pace of the irregular migration route, not paying the smugglers or disrupting the order on the migration route can result in violence:

I also had one girl client. She was going to come with a human smuggler, but the incident turned into human trafficking because her money was not enough. They inflicted violence on the child, because she took up space, etc. She had no money. She was saying she would work and save money. But for them, the risk if she escapes. They did not take her to the bus station, they leave her beaten on the street. Injured and devastated child. The child did not speak the language, she was lying in the park. (T-NGO1)

They come on foot; the biggest problem is that we hear a lot. 3 brothers left their country together, and only one of them could make it. I call it smugglers' business because they turned the situation into an economic issue, children are exposed to harassment and rape. (T-NGO3)

The family can come to an agreement with human smugglers, or they can get the child to come to an agreement. In the meantime, of course, they can be subjected to sexual harassment or violence. The child can go through a lot of traumas. By the way, I met mostly boys and girls, but they are in the minority. (T-NGO4)

The extent of violence against children can change due to the thin line between human smuggling and human trafficking, and the transformation of human trafficking into human trafficking due to the individuals, networks and organizations organizing both. (Yıldız, 2017, p. 35) In particular, there are severe situations such as being forced into prostitution due to the inability of the children to pay:

... there are different smugglers in Iran, and there are different smugglers in Turkey. When they cross the border, abuse is in question among smugglers in Turkey this time. Here, for example, small children are sexually abused. Here, they are dragging themselves into prostitution. That's what children are trying to sell. (T-NGO5)

All forms of violence might pose great trauma for individuals who have just completed their childhood, and it can leave damage that they will carry for the rest of their lives unless necessary measures to take the best interests of the children into account have not been applied. For this reason, it is very important that all children seeking international protection have access both to the procedures in their country of origin and qualified psycho-social support during the process. An error in this process might trigger or initiate secondary trauma, which would cause the child to be traumatized again. (Polat, 2015, pp. 231–235) Nonetheless, the greatest danger that exists is death. Although the proportion of children who embark on the journey is not known, some of them die on the migration route: “*The children who arrive are the ones who can arrive in the country and survive. Some children die on the way.* (T-NGO1)”

Even if the border is crossed after the long migration journey, the dangers continue. Other difficulties and dangers, especially after crossing the border, are that smugglers want the rest of the money and do not let them cross the border illegally until they get their payment and keep them in houses and hotels in bad conditions. The difficulties they have to face are poor housing and unhygienic conditions and malnutrition. Children are usually detained by human smugglers usually when they fail to pay the rest of the payment as they get sick due to the poor conditions on the migration route, or when they do not receive money from their family members or acquaintances in their country:

“After we crossed the border, they threatened us. They asked for money from us and our family. We stayed in the smugglers’ houses for two months and a week. (T-UAC1, Iran, 21 years old)

“There was a village nearby and he hid us there for about 1.5-2 days., The roads the cars would take were dangerous, there were the police, ... We did not have any information then. They made us live in that village for 2 days. Then, we went to another village again. We stayed there for a day. After that, they took us to Doğu Beyazıt, again a different place. There, they asked for money. I had a friend in Iran, I had given my money to him. I called him he could send that money to me and then they released us. (T-UAC3, Iran, 22 years old)

Another critical issue is the children's detention and being under supervision by the law enforcement officers at the border. Other controversial issues include lack of enough nutrition under supervision and non-right-based consideration of the best interests of the child. The problems discussed here are only within the scope of this research and cannot be generalized.

Border experiences of unaccompanied children are not limited to their arrival to the country. Those who want and try to transit from Turkey to Europe are also trying to cross Turkey's western border. T-UAC3 stated that one of his friends passed through Edirne illegally and continued his journey on foot, and the last time he heard from him was when he was in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In summary, unaccompanied children do not always start the journey alone, they may start the journey with their friends, siblings or family members they lost on the way. Their journey mostly includes irregular migration movements. It often involves risks and dangers such as violence, long walks, obscurity, injury and death, malnutrition and hygiene, and detention and deportation upon arrival. These hazards may happen independently but mostly they intersect:

I had a child client who was sexually assaulted. The perpetrator took the child and gave it to the human smuggler so that he would not be disclosed. The child did not know what was happening and did not know what to do. He learned when he came. To cover up the guy will go to jail. (Is the boy's mother there?) no, his dead mother. He has a stepmother and stepsisters. Dad was also behaving badly. The working boy was taken from school. While working, he was exposed to such treatment by the people there. While the child was crying, someone saw him. That man went to his workplace. etc. I don't know the exact details, but the man threatened the human smuggler. The man gives the money. (T-NGO1)

I remember one thing, I was very impressed. A mother goes out with her children, the mother dies in a gunfight and she has 3 children, one of whom is a baby, smugglers had the baby dropped into the lake because the baby was slowing them down. He continued with his two children. Those two children came unaccompanied. There are very bad stories. (T-NGO3)

There was an unaccompanied children Afghan national who fled from domestic violence. Together with him, 30-35 children were detained somewhere on the road near the border for 25 days for human trafficking by smugglers. They gave water and bread just to survive. Somewhere like a barn. (T-NGO3)

These examples show that not only unaccompanied children, but all children who participate in irregular migration and who are somehow forcibly displaced come through a dangerous, risky and painful journey.

To sum up, the reasons unaccompanied children migrated from their country of origin to Turkey can be listed:

- a. Poverty
- b. Being unaccompanied at home country
- c. Willing to continue education
- d. Career plans
- e. War and conflict
- f. Family strategy
- g. Violence

Moreover, the risks and dangers that unaccompanied children face during their journey to Turkey can be listed:

- a. Death
- b. Long walks
- c. Detention
- d. Deportation
- e. Violence
- f. The transition from smuggling to human trafficking
- g. Lack of hygiene and nutrition

The findings of this research can be considered together with parallel findings of Italy experiences of unaccompanied children that face similar risks and dangers (Altıntop, 2022) as well as other unaccompanied and accompanied children who escaped from their country of origin. (Høvring, 2016; Khan, 2022; Mangrio et al., 2018; Unicef, 2016) For example, unaccompanied children who migrated to Italy also face the risk of death, detention in Libya, long walks on the African routes, crossing the unsafe

border and lack of hygiene. (Altıntop, 2022) Moreover, children from Ukraine have experienced similar risks because of the invasion of Russia. They have escaped from gunfire and air strikes and crossed the border with a long-waiting process (Khan, 2022) similar to children who escaped from Syria to European countries. They also walked 10-40 days on foot to reach their target countries (Mangrio et al., 2018, p. 3), separated from their families (Høvring, 2016) or being unaccompanied because of war or dangers that the journey contains. (EC & EMN, 2018) However, it must be noted that the specific forms of risks and dangers may vary from region to region or country to country like unaccompanied children in Italy trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Italy and European Union. As a conclusion, eventually, not only unaccompanied children in Turkey but also children in other countries experience similar processes as the concept of mixed migration argues that people including children who mixed in their journey face similar risks and dangers.

5. Conclusion

Unaccompanied children migrate from different countries with different motivations. These motivations or reasons can be intertwined individually. Moreover, unaccompanied children with different motivations migrate with other children and adults. This mixing in motivation and migration journey shows that the concept of mixed migration is also important in explaining the journey and border experiences of unaccompanied children. In the field research, it has been determined that unaccompanied children are generally male and their ages are between 15-17, the reasons for migration are economic-based such as poverty, making money, and education-based or compulsory reasons such as war and conflict. However, it cannot be stated that the causes differ from each other individually in every case. It is also seen that a child fleeing from poverty experiences violence in his/her family or there are conflicts in his/her country.

The journey generally takes place irregularly via Iran and Doğu Beyazıt. The reasons may vary depending on the country they come from. While poverty, war and family strategy are at the forefront for those coming from Afghanistan, social exclusion, poverty and violence are at the forefront for those coming from Iran. Along the way, they encounter different dangers such as violence, long walks, obscurity, injury and death, detention after crossing the border, malnutrition and hygiene.

It is an indication of the agency of children that they emigrate alone, with their friends or siblings, or by losing family members on the way, to be on the move and to make the decision to migrate. While emphasizing the agency of children to endure a dangerous, long and difficult journey and somehow complete the irregular migration movement, this does not mean that children are not only active agents but also that they are beings that need to be protected and whose best interests should be observed. Migration of unaccompanied children by their own decisions or the strategies they are involved in, and their arrival in the intended transit or destination country has an impact on countries which must provide protection and implement, create or revise necessary regulations for this protection paying regard the best interests of the child.

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